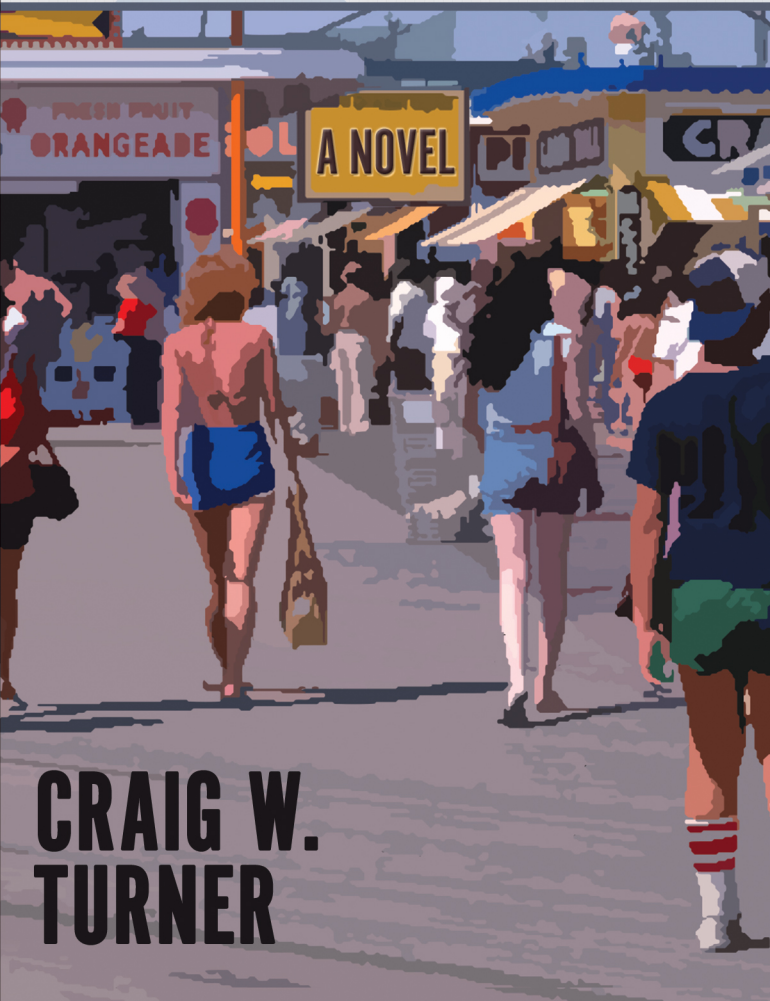


*THE* Infamous  
**JERSEY SHORE  
PICKPOCKET  
RING OF 1979**



**CRAIG W.  
TURNER**

Find other Political Thrillers by  
Craig W. Turner at Amazon.com

## PRAISE FOR The CampAIgn

*"Technology scares me. Not using it but what happens if the power goes out, and way too much information is floating in the cloud? This book certainly didn't reassure me."* - Amazon Reviewer

*"While the theme is an old one, man vs. machine the dynamic is done with a modern and sometimes prophetic insight told from a passionate heart."*  
- Goodreads Reviewer

## PRAISE FOR The Kingmaker

*"A fascinating dive into the mechanics and seamy underside of politics and of all that it takes to build a successful candidate as well as the machine to get him/her in office.."* - Amazon Reviewer

*"Reinforces the creed that before voting people have to research and understand their candidate's platforms before casting a ballot."*  
- Amazon Reviewer

*"A great mix of cloak and dagger, mystery, politics and even a little celebrity tabloidism."*  
- BookSirens Reviewer

OTHER BOOKS  
BY CRAIG W. TURNER

*FICTION*

*Border Troubles*

*Wilton's Gold – Book One: Fortune*

*Wilton's Gold – Book Two: Fulfillment*

*Wilton's Gold – Book Three: Fate*

*The Garden*

*The Campaign*

*The Kingmaker*

*NON-FICTION*

*Running, Winning, Serving: The Candidate's Guide to  
Local Elections*

*The Campaign Coach's Campaign Blueprint*

CRAIG W. TURNER

THE INFAMOUS JERSEY  
SHORE PICKPOCKET  
RING OF 1979

A NOVEL

Sale of this book without a front cover may be unauthorized. If this book is coverless, it may have been reported to the publisher as “unsold or destroyed” and neither the author nor the publisher have received payment for it.

*The Infamous Jersey Shore Pickpocket Ring of 1979* is a work of fiction. Names, characters, incidents either are products of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Copyright © 2023 by Craig W. Turner

ISBN 13: 979-8378326747

Cover design: Cassandra Santa Maria

Printed in the United States of America

*To my New Jersey crew, and  
a third basket of cheeseballs*

*July 4, 1979*  
*Seaside Heights, NJ*

Another firework fluttered, sparking, then falling harmlessly to the beach. The writing was on the wall – it just wasn't happening tonight.

James Peterson gave the organizers credit for trying. The show must go on. They'd even said those exact words over the Boardwalk loudspeakers. But the rain was simply starting to fall too hard at this point.

He looked down at his newly-minted fiancé, Theresa, having only slipped the ring on her finger five days before, going all out and renting a boat and taking her out on Toms River to propose and watch the sunset together. It had been a glorious evening, and he was elated to get to spend the rest of his life with her after a whirlwind courtship. They'd met only a few months earlier at a mixer for single parents at the Ground Round in Lakewood. Great event. The kids ate free popcorn and watched Laurel & Hardy movies on their screen while James fell in love. Only a few short months later, they were planning a February wedding.

So, it was with disappointment that Theresa and James made knowing eye contact that their first Fourth of July celebration together was a rainout. In the lights emanating from the nearby arcade, he saw a slight smile cross her face, and read what she was saying without words: they'd have lots of fireworks shows together going forward. He joined her in the smile.

The rain was now coming down hard enough to mat their hair down. "You want to get a drink before we go?"

"We already paid the babysitter," she agreed.

After a quick scan up and down the Boardwalk, James grabbed her hand and led her to the closest establishment

servicing alcohol, a restaurant and pub a football field's length away. Many others who'd shown up for the fireworks were also giving up and making their ways to grab a slice of pizza, play some Skee-ball or just head home. With the forecast that rain was possible, Seaside wasn't as packed as it probably should've been for July 4<sup>th</sup> festivities, but there were still plenty of people walking, and James navigated his fiancé through the throng.

Arriving at the restaurant, he ducked under the awning, motioned to the hostess that they'd sit at the bar, and quickly were seated on stools facing a wall of liquor bottles, dry and secure. The place was bustling, with diners at almost all of the tables, even at the late hour and the bar mostly full. They could feel the thumping disco beat of Donna Summer's *Bad Girls* in the floor. After they took a moment to gather themselves, Theresa stood and excused herself to the restroom to freshen up from the rain.

The bartender came over and James ordered – a Michelob Light for himself, which he'd started drinking right about the time they'd met and really liked, and a Whiskey Sour for his bride-to-be. There was something about knowing your girl's choice of drink and being able to order it for her without her having to tell you. He appreciated the familiarity they'd already achieved. She was without a doubt the one.

The bartender, a skinny guy probably around 20 years old with floppy black hair and a thin moustache, dropped off their drinks. He slapped a receipt on the bar. "Six-fifty."

James nodded and reached to his back pocket for his wallet, already doing the math in his head that he'd give the guy a \$10 and then not tip as much on the second round.

His wallet wasn't there.

Instinctively, he stood and looked on the ground beneath his stool. Nothing.

Patting his pocket again as though it would suddenly reappear, he searched his mind. Did he leave it at home? In the car? He hadn't taken it out since they'd arrived at the Boardwalk. It had to be at home. But that was unlike him, because he kept it in the bowl with his keys.



“Honey?”

He looked up to find Theresa standing a few paces away. He started to tell her the story, but noticed she was distraught. “What’s going on?”

Tears streamed down her face. “My ring. I don’t know where it is.”

“Your ring?! I can’t find my wallet. What happened?”

“It had to be those boys.”

“What boys?” The realization hit him, and every ounce of hope exited his body simultaneously. As they were waiting for the fireworks show to start, two teenage boys had been chasing each other around the area, roughhousing. The one was trying to hit the other with a giant blow-up baseball bat that they must’ve won at one of the arcades. The other, trying to evade him, had used James and Theresa as a human shield, yelling for the other to stop. They’d danced around them for a good fifteen seconds. It had been unbelievably rude, and James had shooed them away before they ran down the Boardwalk carrying on. “Pickpockets,” he said out loud. “Dammit.”

“What do we do?” She was starting to get hysterical.

Fortunately, the bartender jumped in, the phone receiver in his hand already. “We’re seeing that a lot this summer. I’ll call the Seaside Heights Police for you. Maybe they’ve seen something.”

The man dialed and handed the phone to James, who put his arm out for Theresa. She buried herself inside and he squeezed her tightly as he told the story to police. After they took all of his information and promised to “see what they can do,” he handed the phone back across the bar and thanked the bartender.

Now, Theresa fell apart, her head hidden in his shoulder, weeping. He wrapped both arms around her, thinking, planning. Finally, he pulled back so he could see her face. He hated to see her crying, so first things first he wanted to comfort her. “Theresa, it’s okay. I bought the insurance for it.”

She shook her head. “That’s not enough. It’s my ring.”

“I know,” he said, trying to stay as calm as possible, even though he was ready to destroy something. He only had \$60 in his wallet, so it wasn’t terrible. It was the point.

The ring, however, was devastating. “Look, let’s go walk around and see if we see something. Maybe they’re still around working the Boardwalk and we can identify them. It’s only been about a half-hour.”

She looked up at him, still crying, and nodded feebly.

Feeling as though he was getting somewhere with her, James took her hand and led her back out onto the Boardwalk, leaving their drinks dripping condensation onto the bar. Once outside, they started to walk, peering at every face that passed them for the two boys who had destroyed their magic.

\*\*\*

People walked differently, depending on where they were from.

Scott Belanger was getting good at picking them up. He’d spent enough time here to know the difference between a New Yorker and someone local. The New Yorkers, down from the big city, the “bennies,” as his parents called them, taking advantage of the benefits of the Jersey Shore every summer, walked very quickly. Short steps. As if they always had somewhere to be. One would think that being away from the crazy lives they live every day, they’d be able to relax. Not so.

The locals were more deliberate, meandering on the Boardwalk above them, their slow, heavy footsteps – didn’t matter, men, women or children – up and down all day, taking everything in. To them, it was just another day at the shore.

The locals were much easier targets for them. But the New Yorkers had the good stuff.

“How’d you do?” a whisper came from his left. Scott looked out the small opening in the sand dunes to see a silhouette the shape of Peter, climbing into the small alcove they’d commandeered as their hideout.

“Good night,” Scott said, nodding in the dark. The surf was coming in strong this evening with the rainstorm blowing through, so they could afford to whisper just a few feet below where people were walking.

Peter Blythe was the oldest of the group, and pretty much their leader. He was tall, blonde and handsome, and no one up above would ever see him coming. His uncle in Lakehurst had been a magician, and had innocently taught him some tricks of the trade in sleight-of-hand. They all thought Peter might be able earn some extra bucks for college as a tableside magician someday or, at the least, impress a girl into his bed. Peter had different ideas, however, and had spent the summer of 1978 honing his pickpocketing craft. He'd brilliantly masked what he was doing by taking odd jobs through the summer, so no one really asked how he was the only 17-year-old in the neighborhood who'd bought himself a Harley. Every day, people would see him mowing a lawn, washing a car or up on a neighbor's roof hammering something. The perfect cover.

Every night, however, he was snaking his way through the sporadic crowds of people traipsing up and down New Jersey's most popular boardwalk area, pulling watches, jewelry, money clips and anything else he could grab off of unsuspecting tourists. He was very proud of his efforts – and not just the booty. Thanks to Peter's work in the short summer months of 1978 before he went back to the normal life of a high school junior, running track and scribbling test answers on his wrist, the Seaside Heights Police Department had not only increased its presence on the Boardwalk and parallel Ocean Terrace (which turned into N. Ocean Ave at Porter), but stationed officers at the various exits off of the Boardwalk to scan for people leaving in a suspicious hurry. Working alone, he'd completely altered Seaside PD operations.

To note, a lot of people thought the signs that sometimes dotted the Boardwalk, reading, "Beware of pickpockets," were also police department policy. No, that was Peter. A tourist sees a sign like that, and they immediately touch their most precious belongings on their person to make sure they hadn't already been accosted. Ten minutes with a piece of paper and a thick marker, and it was easy pickings.

But, the newly-developed policing strategy was the very reason they now gathered underneath the Boardwalk just north of Lincoln Avenue. They, being Peter, Scott and

their other two compadres, Randy Helfrick and Timmy Turner, “Double T,” who had yet to arrive.

See, Peter wasn’t just a talented pickpocket; he was an entrepreneur. After a summer of grabbing and dashing, he had a good feel for Boardwalk visitors, and knew how to optimize not only his time, but his efforts. Unfortunately, there were way too many people to cover, and one person showing his face repetitively was going to get pinched at some point. He was still ahead of law enforcement for the time being, but not by far.

So, he came up with a plan. When the summer was over, he called his three best friends to a secret meeting and invited them to join his team. He would spend the winter training them, and they’d go to work in the summer of ’79. It would be dangerous, but it would be lucrative, and they’d have a nice financial head start on life as they finished up high school.

Teens being reckless as they sometimes will be, they all jumped in feet first. Now, just over a month into their joint venture, they were getting into a groove. There had been some hair-raising moments throughout June, but Peter had predicted that the July 4 holiday would be a good day to ramp up their efforts. He’d been right – the celebrations had kept people’s attention and while the rain had thinned out the crowd a little, it was just another usable distraction.

“I did well,” he continued, as he tossed a few items into a four-foot pit that they’d dug in the sand, which was already partially filled with items from the previous weeks. The cache had been a good idea – a landing site for everything they’d grabbed so no one was walking around with much on them, just in case. Of course, if the cache was found, it would then transition to being a horrible idea, but for now the plan was working, as each night they laid a cloth over it and covered it back up with sand. If, and that was a big if, anyone else found themselves under the Boardwalk, they would have no reason to suspect there was anything beneath them to investigate.

“Not too many wallets,” Peter admonished, noticing Scott pull one from his oversized sweatshirt pocket. “Use your time wisely. Focus on gold.”

He nodded, pulling three bills – couldn't tell what they were in the dark – from inside. "I know. It was just right there. Too easy. I don't know where Double T got the idea, but he was whacking me with this stupid floaty baseball bat. It was annoying. But this couple was paying attention to him, and left themselves wide open." He tossed the empty wallet into the pit. "Check this out." He pulled the big prize, the engagement ring, from his shorts' pocket, and handed it across.

Peter took it and felt it between his fingers. Even though their eyes had somewhat adjusted to the dark, and hints of light from the Boardwalk came through the slats above them, he couldn't see what he was holding. But it would definitely be the top score of the night. Nice big rock. Which meant the gold was top grade, too.

Peter's instructions to Scott about seeking out gold over wallets were strategic. In the summer of '79, the price of gold had advanced to nearly double what it had been the year before. Even as lucrative as Peter's efforts had been previously, by focusing on gold, they would more than double their revenue, even if their output stayed exactly the same – which it wouldn't, with four people on the job. Easy cash was nice, but Peter said many times, if one of them were to get nipped, they'd better have a gold watch in their hand instead of someone's stupid wallet, or there'd be hell to pay.

Instead of tossing the ring in with everything else, Peter stuffed it into his pocket. "Let's see if we can do something with this one."

Scott was fine with that. Peter made the rules, and he'd been fair with them on everything they'd decided to cash in. He said he had a plan for everything else here, to come back and get it all at some point, but hadn't shared it with them yet.

They heard footsteps in the sand, and looked up to see shadows of Randy and Timmy sneaking in. Peter slid to the side to make room for them, and they all sat around the pit. The footsteps above had dwindled to a trickle, with the rain and the late hour, so now they had to keep it quieter. "How'd we do?" Peter asked the newcomers.

They both began emptying their pockets. "Small stuff," Randy said. "Couple thousand dollars' worth, probably."

"Good."

"I was going to kill you with that stupid baseball bat," Scott said, punching Timmy hard in the arm. "You were driving me crazy."

Timmy fell backwards, and couldn't stifle a laugh.

"These stupid schemes you come up with," Scott kept muttering.

"Hey," Peter whispered sternly. "Cut it out. Now." They stopped and behaved. When everyone settled, he continued, "Scott got an engagement ring. Looks pretty pricey. We're going to try to move it. Everybody can have a little cash for the great job this week."

"Sweet," Randy offered.

"Anything suspicious tonight?"

They all shook their heads, but Timmy spoke up, "That disco photographer was out there, again, taking pictures. I said hello."

Peter sighed. "Alright, that's not a problem. Just don't go out of your way to engage with him."

"That disco photographer" was a long-haired guy they only knew as "Richie," who roamed the area daily taking photos of the Boardwalk and beach for some unknown project – he had to have thousands upon thousands of pictures. Peter was well aware that some of those included photos of them, and had even asked him about it at one point. His answer was an unwavering, "I don't care what the hell you do. These pictures are for me." To date, he hadn't strayed from that stance, though Peter was waiting for the day the cops would put two-and-two together and ask him about the pickpocket ring. He'd asked a friend's father who was a lawyer if the police could force someone to turn over pictures, and he'd said no. Well, he thought the answer was no.

It was late, the scheduled fireworks pushing their normal work hours almost to 11 p.m. now, so they finished dumping their treasures into the pit. Scott grabbed the cloth that had been laid aside and covered everything, then they used cupped hands to refill the pit, Peter noting

the irony that rain always made for a fruitful night, but also created much more work maneuvering the sand in and out. After about 10 minutes, there was no more evidence of their loot.

They had a system for leaving that wouldn't draw attention, which they enacted, staggering their exit from different areas underneath the Boardwalk, then leaving at different times. Randy was the first to leave, and he disappeared south – he'd crawl up about a football field's length away and show up on the Boardwalk as if coming from that direction. Scott was next, slithering 100 feet or so to the north and using a small opening to emerge onto the beach right near an entrance ramp. He hid in the shadows for a moment, taking off his shirt and shoes, then stood, walking toward the ramp with heavy footsteps sinking into the cool sand, and carrying his gear as though he'd been down checking out the surf under the overcast night. Once he stepped up onto the Boardwalk, he used the showers to wash sand from his feet, then donned his shirt and shoes again, and slid across the slatted boards toward the arcade. He'd spend the next half-hour dropping quarters into the Skee-ball machine, and then meet up with the guys the following day back closer to home.

“That's him!” a voice from his left shocked him awake, and his legs kicked into gear without looking back at who'd said it. The Boardwalk traffic was sparse at that point of the night, so chances were it was meant for him. Pausing to find out was a ticket to trouble.

Scott continued his path into the arcade at full sprint, thinking as he ran. Peter had trained them for this. There were enough distractions along the Boardwalk to provide some cover, but every second that ticked away gave the Seaside police more time to call for back-up. He knew the street on the other side of the building was already riddled with law enforcement, so running straight through wouldn't necessarily work.

Once he reached the noise and the lights of the array of machines in the arcade, he could now afford to assess the situation. He set up behind a claw machine and peered out toward the Boardwalk, confirming his evaluation that they were after him. He saw a man and a

woman standing with two uniformed officers at the entrance to the arcade, one of the officers shouting into a walkie-talkie, the other pointing toward the sides of the building, organizing a siege.

He knew he didn't have time to think. As soon as other officers arrived, they'd have all of the exits covered, and he'd be stuck inside. He gambled that anyone after him would be coming from the north side of the building, as that's where he'd initially been recognized, and darted for the south entrance, which led into an adjoining pizza place. A family jumped, startled in unison, when he burst in, interrupting them placing their order at the counter, and he headed for the opening to the Boardwalk to reassess the situation. He poked his head out quickly, and saw the couple still standing there – now recognizing them as the couple that he and Timmy had accosted with the blow-up toy while taking the man's wallet and the woman's engagement ring. Two more cops had arrived, and were standing behind, listening in.

Scott retreated to the innermost section of the pizzeria, knowing they'd come his way at some point, then shadowed the far wall, putting himself in sight for a moment before sliding deftly behind a retail rack of t-shirts that was set up outside but under the extended awning of the tourist gift shop next door. He used the cover to duck into the store, just as one of the cops moved down the Boardwalk to inspect the pizza place. He was one storefront ahead of them.

Inside the shop, he took a deep breath and walked calmly deeper into the store amidst shelves of t-shirts, hats, beach toys and snow globes featuring the Seaside Heights logo. Toward the back, there was a dressing room, and he gave thought to popping in, but also knew if they put two-and-two together, he'd be a sitting duck for them. No one else was in the narrow store except for a young man behind the counter, who he didn't want to do anything to alarm, so asking if there was a back door was out of the question. He noticed the man looking outside and turned to see another cop run by, north to south, toward the others. Now, he was curious, which was a problem.



As casually as he could muster, Scott picked up a sweatshirt whose decal read *Jersey Shore* with a silhouetted map of the state on it and held it up to the guy, distracting him. "Can I try this on?" he asked.

The man stopped, giving Scott his attention. "Dressing rooms are in the back," he pointed.

He inspected the shirt. "I don't see a tag. How much are these?"

"Sweatshirts are ten dollars."

"Far out." He didn't typically talk like that, but the man's look, a leftover hippie, made him feel like it would help them connect.

Without any haste that could raise suspicion, Scott moved into the closest dressing room of the two the store had and closed the door behind him. He sat on a small wooden bench and put his feet up against the door, knowing that if they tracked him down it would be a feeble attempt at resistance. He sat quietly for a few minutes, his hopes of escape increasing until he heard a strong voice outside. "Anyone come in here?"

He was cooked. There was no reason for the store clerk to cover for him. He winced, waiting for a knock on the dressing room door.

It never came.

He let out a breath, wondering what had happened, stuck in his four-foot by four-foot cocoon. Had the guy diverted the police, denied that he was hiding in there? For what reason?

He heard footsteps coming toward him and braced his feet against the door.

"Hey man, you okay in there?"

"I am, yes."

"You like that shirt?"

Scott loosened his blockade and stood, opening the door a few inches. "I do. Are you closing soon?"

Fingers appeared around the edge of the door and it whipped open the rest of the way, causing Scott to jump back. He stumbled back onto the bench and looked up, ready to accept his fate.

But instead of a cop standing with the store clerk, it was Peter. He was laughing. "You run into some trouble?" He extended his hand.

“Kiss my ass,” Scott said, taking it. Peter helped him to his feet, and he stepped out of the dressing room.

“Try to be a little more careful.” He turned toward the clerk. “This is Wally. If there’s ever a problem, you can count on him.”

Scott turned to the man, confused, but nodded his thanks.

“Come on,” Peter took him by the arm. “They’re still out there. This way.”

They headed toward the back of the store and through a door that Scott hadn’t noticed, leading to a downstairs stockroom, which had its own exit. They poked through the door, Peter stepping out to peer up in all directions. Somehow the hub-bub on the Boardwalk hadn’t leaked out to the street, as they must have figured they’d cornered him in the arcade.

“Follow me,” Peter instructed, and they walked brazenly, to Scott’s surprise, across Ocean Terrace, past the mini-golf course that was still relatively busy, despite the weather, and ducking into the closest driveway. They crouched in a dark for a few minutes, listening for commotion, but heard none. Scott’s nerves had calmed by then, feeling as though they’d made the narrow escape successfully. Eventually, he felt Peter’s hand on his shoulder. “You did well.”

“Who knows? I think I was just lucky.”

“Maybe. But there’s a reason that we come out in different locations along the Boardwalk. And there’s a reason that we have you go directly to that arcade when you leave. And there’s a reason that I made friends with Wally and slip him a few bucks every once in a while. But, yes, it was probably luck.”

Scott looked at him under the streetlights, his face shadowed, but he could still make out the sarcastic grin. It was enough to make him laugh. “You’re unbelievable.”

“Let’s get out of here.”

With Peter leading, they stood and made their way to meet the others at his car.

*July 11, 1979*  
*Toms River, NJ*

“A picnic sounds great,” David said. “Maybe I’ll bring some fishing stuff, and we can drop a line or two in.”

“Don’t go to too much trouble,” Karen said. “I don’t know if he’ll be into it. I’d hate for you to—”

“It’s not a problem. Gotta start sometime.”

David Alden was leaning on the jewelry display case, filled with rings, necklaces and bracelets featuring various colorful gemstones, his palms gently resting on the metal frame, so as to not get fingerprints on the glass. His shop, Alden Jewelers, was the product of him learning that he had a hard time working for someone else, and an opportunity that had arisen to go out on his own, made possible by a lump of life insurance money from his grandfather in the summer of ’76. Things were going well, comparatively, though the one thing he hadn’t anticipated about being a small business owner was the constant knowledge that it could all go south at any moment. For now, he was happy to go with the flow.

Personally, though, after three years of a treacherous divorce, his life was looking up. Finally. Across the display case from him was his new love, Karen Ebel (nee Weiss), who’d knocked him off his feet the moment he’d laid eyes on her. He’d known instantly that she was the one he’d spend the rest of his life with, and had set out immediately to convince her of it. To his good fortune, she’d at least been willing to listen, and six months now into their knowing each other, she hadn’t fled.

Karen had stopped in to say hello, having been at the Ocean County Mall, just down the street, with her five-year-old son, Martin, who was busy making David’s own attempt to keep fingerprints off the glass moot. It was alright, though. His daughter, Carrie, knew the rules. But he and Martin were still figuring out their relationship. He wasn’t about to put a blemish on it over a blemish on his display case.

“Okay, I’ll get some sandwich stuff,” Karen continued, noticing Martin now putting his actual face right onto the

glass, and reaching down to pull him away. She looked up to see David smiling. “You sure you want to put a fishhook in this guy’s hands?”

They laughed. “It’s fine,” he said.

“We’ll let you go, then. Get your stuff done.”

“Sounds good. I’ll call you later.” He gave a little kid wave. “Bye Martin.”

Karen turned with her son and exited out the glass door, which chimed as it opened. They weren’t at “I love you” stage yet. Not even at a goodbye peck on the lips in front of the kids. But they were getting there. The picnic would be fun – just the third time that both kids would be together. He was already looking forward to it.

Settling back in at his bench from the welcome interruption, David refocused on his work.

He’d barely gotten started when the bell over the front door chimed as it opened, and he looked up from his work, pulling his thumb off the solder gun again, extinguishing the small blue flame. He lifted his goggles up to the top of his head, but not before rolling his eyes at who’d entered.

When opening his jewelry store, he never imagined that he’d have to become a detective, as well. This non-descript kid had started last year bringing in random pieces of gold to cash in from time-to-time, maybe a half-dozen times over the summer. It was frequent enough to raise an eyebrow, but not financially enough to make a big deal about. Metal detecting had become a big craze in the past few years, so there was a possibility he was on the up-and-up, but still, David hadn’t wanted to get in too deep with him. And gold was gold.

This year was a different story, however. The price of gold had doubled from the year before, and cash-hungry people were flocking to the store every day now, looking to hock everything from their families’ valuables to the gold fillings they’d installed earlier in the decade. It was a good time to be in the business, because there was lots of money to be made, but cashflow was always a concern. Both for the security of cash-on-hand, but also because it only took two or three customers coming in to sell a heavy

gold ring or watch, and suddenly a small shop was short for the day.

“Peter,” as he’d introduced himself a year ago, entered and approached the glass showcase. David rose to meet him, not fully removing his goggles, knowing how the conversation was going to go, and that he’d be back to work quickly. This time, he was ready. Probably more ready than he cared to be, but ready.

“How are you, David?” The young man had honed his charisma at an early age, and was exceptionally personable. He couldn’t have been out of high school yet, but he carried himself like a seasoned business professional.

He nodded. “We’re doing well. Very busy time of year. How about you?”

“Oh, I’m good. Love the summer. I can get my metal detector out and find some really great stuff. It’s strange that more people around here don’t do it.”

“You’d be surprised,” he deadpanned back.

Peter reached in his pocket. “So, I found this little beauty the other day on the beach, south end, almost to Seaside Park.” He produced a diamond engagement ring, and held it out for David to take. “I feel bad for the woman who lost it, because it’s a beauty. Hopefully they had insurance. How much would this be worth?”

In past instances, David had taken the item, brought it back to his bench, and inspected it through a loop – both the diamond and the gold. In this case, he didn’t extend his hand, causing Peter to reach further across the showcase in an effort to get him to take it.

Now, David demonstratively took off his goggles and set them on the glass, then leaned forward. Surprised at the reaction, the young man took his hand back, with the ring still in it. “I can’t take it,” he said.

“Why not?”

He let out a sigh. “You see, Peter, when you’re in the jewelry business, you occasionally get bulletins like this. He reached underneath the counter and pulled out a blue piece of paper he’d received, and had been hanging onto for about two weeks. The paper was folded in quarters, revealing a scribbled note: “Keep an eye out for this. -R.” He held it out to him.

Peter looked at him for a moment, then slowly took it and opened it, inspecting it. While he did so, David noticed for the first time three other young men, of similar age, standing in the parking lot outside, behind him.

“Can I ask where you got this?” Peter asked after taking it in for a moment.

“No.” He waited for a reaction, but got none. Mister Smooth had met his match. So, he continued, “Now, I’m not going to cast any accusation here that the ring you’re holding is the same as the one that was stolen. All I’m telling you is that I can’t take it.”

Regrouped and smiling, Peter calmly folded up the page and handed it back to David. So professional, for such a young guy. “Understood,” he said, shoving the ring back into his pocket.

He turned to leave, but David stopped him. “Also, I don’t ever want to see you in here again.”

The young man stopped at the door, then pushed it open and exited without saying another word.

David peered outside through the door, and watched as Peter approached the other boys, attempting to read his body language. They stood, talking for two or three minutes, then left.

Feeling as though he’d done his good deed for the day, David slipped on his goggles and went back to work.

## CHAPTER 1

### *Present Day*

Scott Belanger had been to his share of funerals, and understood that everyone reacted in their own way. But he'd never seen anyone quite so worked up in mourning as Peter was, standing there, almost fuming, as the priest finished up his final words.

He looked on in astonishment, as his friend was losing it. His face was red, sweat visible on his forehead. If he was correct, Peter might even have been trembling. The August morning sun was already hot, but this was something different. He was clearly affected.

Scott leaned over and put his arm around him, wrapping his hand around his shoulder and pulling him close for a moment. Peter looked up at him crazy-eyed, simply shaking his head, so he let go, patting him twice on the back. Unable to control himself, Peter turned and walked several feet back to the back of the gathered friends and family, taking a position there. Scott watched him go, then returned his focus to the ceremony.

Ten feet away, Randy's coffin lay draped with a white pall adorned with a gold cross. Father Dressler, Teddy Dressler, who they'd all grown up with, was finishing up, and addressing the wonderful woman who suddenly found herself as Randy's widow, Shelley. She was handling all of this better than any of them, and Scott, himself, found strength in hers. Peter was making *him* look like a rock.

It wasn't like they didn't know it was coming, although how could you ever be ready to bury a childhood friend? Randy's cancer diagnosis had come around Christmas – a horrible way to begin the new year – and, unfortunately, they'd caught it late. Lymphoma that had already started to spread. They'd attempted treatment for a short while until they saw the writing on the wall, and Randy determined he didn't want to spend the rest of his available days “like that.” He and Grace had gotten in some travel destinations they'd wanted to get to. Greece. Ireland. And then they'd settled in for the final stretch. He'd been surrounded by family and friends, which Scott was sure he was thankful for, and then earlier that week they'd gotten the call. The phone tree started, and while the funeral ceremony at the cemetery this morning was reserved for close friends and family, nearly 600 people had visited the funeral home the night before to see their friend off.

While they'd never really lost touch, Randy's passing brought the gang back together for the first time in a while. Like Randy, Scott had stayed in town, selling Jersey Shore real estate and making a name for himself through his obnoxious, he would admit, billboards targeted specifically at young, urban New York City couples looking at a family and the white picket fence. He'd married two times, neither marriage yielding children, and had just finished dating a younger realtor (she was 42), even as he had started to scale back his own commitments. Randy, himself, had retired a half-dozen years earlier from 30 years teaching English, of all things, for the Toms River School District. Standing there now, it felt as though they hadn't gotten together as much as they should have, of course, but several times a year they'd grab a round of golf or get a morning coffee and meet in the park by the water to talk about how much things have changed, as old friends will do.

Timmy, Double T, or “Tim,” now, had left, but not too far away, becoming the big city mover-and-shaker that he'd always been destined to be. He'd landed a job out of college with Otis Elevator and had made a career out of it, first working in Manhattan and then graduating to



headquarters in Connecticut, eventually becoming vice president of something important. Too long a title for Scott to pay attention to. In Connecticut, he'd met and married his wife, Cheri, and they'd had a couple later-in-life sons. Though they were the same age, while Randy spent time with his grandchildren, Double T was getting ready to spend his Friday evenings for the next few months in the stands at his two boys' high school football games.

While Connecticut wasn't exactly close, it was pretty much around the corner compared to where Peter's career had taken him. Peter had never settled down, spending the last thirty-some years after skipping college entirely calling himself a "traveling salesman." What he sold, the others had no idea, and every time they had the chance to talk, he had new stories of new adventures and a new woman attached to his hip – two of which he'd married for brief intervals. None of this had slowed down even as he arrived into his sixties. He was always a charmer, and had that really aggravating cockiness even back when they were teens, sitting in his parents basement training them how to pickpocket wealthy tourists on the Seaside Heights Boardwalk.

To some degree, Scott could understand Peter's frustration. He hadn't been back since he'd left after graduation. Kept in touch via e-mail and social media for the most part, once those became available, always promising that he'd be swinging back through town "at some point soon." It had never happened. Scott had seen him just once during that time, happening to be attending a realtor's conference in Denver at the same time Peter was there. He knew Timmy and Peter had enjoyed dinner together a handful of times when he'd visited the city, but that was about it. He was everywhere and he was nowhere. Now, though, as far as Randy was concerned, at least, he was too late. Scott would be frustrated, too, if it was him.

He watched as Shelley approached her husband's casket and set her hands on it, praying. Then, she turned with tears in her eyes and stepped aside, allowing others to approach. Scott and Tim, standing next to each other, got in line together, and after a moment, it was their turn. They stood side-by-side for a moment, quietly.

“We’re going to have to go get a slice of pizza from D’Angelo’s while you’re in town,” Scott said quietly.

“Yep. He loved that place.”

Scott snickered. “I don’t know if he loved it, specifically. But he loved that we all liked it together.”

“You’re right. I think he would’ve preferred that other place...”

“Italian Village,” Peter’s voice came from behind them. He’d skipped the line to stand with his friends. “Better pizza.”

“That was it,” Tim said.

Scott looked at his friend, the leader of their group again. “You okay?”

Peter nodded. “I am. I’m not happy with *him*, though.” He motioned with his chin to the casket. “He broke our deal.”

“Our deal?” Scott looked up at him.

“Peter...” Tim said suspiciously.

He didn’t answer the question, just stood silently, thinking. Maybe praying. After a moment, he put his hand on the casket and tapped it twice. “Love you, buddy,” he said, then looked at the other two. “D’Angelo’s, it is. See you there.”

Scott and Tim glanced to each other, then both took an extra minute to remember their friend. Turning from the casket, they gave their love to Shelley, and then searched the area for Peter.

All they saw was a yellow Camaro pulling away from the line of cars.

\*\*\*

A pie and a half and four pitchers of beer were gone before Scott had the nerve to raise the issue.

Randy had been right – Italian Village’s pizza was still better. But the four of them had spent so much time at D’Angelo’s that there was no other option. They felt bad for not attending the luncheon, but Scott had let Shelley know that this was important and she’d not only understood, but encouraged them to do their own thing. They’d been sitting at the table, the same table where they

ate endless amounts of thin crust pizza with pepperoni, anchovy and cherry peppers throughout high school and into college, for going on four hours. All of them knew they'd feel it in the morning. But that was far less important.

The time had been spent, of course, telling stories of their team's exploits, centering around Randy's role and his array of proclivities. There had been lots of laughter, some misty eyes and plenty of promises to never let the time pass again without seeing each other. Though they all were aware of the time, no one was going anywhere. They were going to talk until they were done talking.

Strangely, though Scott knew exactly why, they'd not said a single word about their biggest adventure: the events of the summer of 1979. He was hesitant to bring it up, and he wasn't sure the reason. Was it because it had ended poorly? Or because he knew that Peter was sitting there waiting for them to say something?

Probably the latter.

He knew Tim would be hesitant to bring it up, as well. Tim's career, much more high-profile, was one where teenage scandal could cause him problems. He, too, would be retiring at some point soon, but he was easily the most powerful and affluent of the group, and wouldn't want his past to soil that in any way. Especially for his sons, both of whom had Division 1 football potential. Scott was well aware, if the topic was to be discussed, it wouldn't be because Tim brought it up. It was up to him.

They settled down from a bout of laughter, the afternoon of alcohol now tipping the balance more toward fun-loving stories than melancholy reminiscences. Scott saw it as an opportunity to bring the conversation back. "I was surprised what you said at the cemetery today," he said, leaning in toward the center of the round table.

"That I was upset with Randy?" He was smug. He knew it was coming. He'd waited them out.

"Well, yes, but about 'our deal'. You said he broke our deal."

"He did."

"What deal, Peter?" He knew. And he knew that Peter knew he knew. But he would play the game Peter's way.

Now, Peter leaned in to meet him. Scott noticed that Tim remained sitting back in his chair. He knew he didn't want any part of even the conversation. He pointed in the general direction of Seaside. "Underneath the Boardwalk is a pit full of gold that we left there. We were supposed to go back and get it. The four of us. Together." He was agitated. The question had gotten him going again. "Not three of us. All four of us."

"What did you think was going to happen? A bunch of sixty-year-olds were going to crawl under the Boardwalk and dig around in the sand? The stuff is gone."

"It's not gone, and you know it. It's still there."

Scott held out his hands. "So, what if it is? Nobody's getting to it. It's not like it was back then. There's security everywhere. Everybody's got a camera in their hands. Even if we were younger and able to do it, you can't just sneak under the Boardwalk anymore."

"The dunes are all different," Tim weighed in, speaking quietly but not moving. Being as matter-of-fact as possible. "Hurricane Sandy changed the entire topography of the area. That stuff could be twenty feet below the sand now, or have completely shifted somewhere else. Washed into the ocean. There's no way."

Peter sat back, laughing. "I can't believe this."

"It's just reality, Peter." Scott informed him.

"Look, you can make up all the bullshit excuses you want. It's there and you both know it is. You're just too chickenshit to go get it."

Tim put his hands up. "If that's what it takes to get you to drop it, then sure. I'm too chickenshit to go get it."

"I'm good with that," Scott added.

Peter leaned in again, about to drop something on them. When Tim didn't join him, he motioned with his finger, calling him closer. Tim huffed and leaned forward.

"I know a way," Peter said.

"You don't," Tim asserted.

Undeterred, he continued. "I know a way, and it doesn't require us to get down in the sand. I've talked to an attorney about the situation. I've known him for a while. Filthy guy. I trust him."

“An attorney-” Scott mumbled, taking a sip of room temperature beer from his stein.

“Who put that gold in that pit?” They looked at him, confused, so he repeated. “Who put that gold in the pit?”

“We did,” Tim said, rolling his eyes. He knew where Peter was going, though Scott didn’t.

“That’s right. We did. That gold belongs to us.”

“That’s ludicrous,” Tim dismissed him. “It belongs to the people we stole it from.”

“Prove it.” He stifled Tim, who, frustrated, was unable to answer. “Really? I’m challenging you. Prove it. Prove that we didn’t metal detect all that stuff and put it into a cache to keep it safe.”

Tim shook his head. Scott was along for the ride now. “Police reports? Reports of stolen property?”

“Really? Somebody’s going to go through and try to match a bunch of old, broken jewelry that’s been subjected to surf, tide and hurricanes to some old handwritten police reports? This isn’t today. This is forty years ago.”

Tim sighed. “It’s a stretch.”

“Well, take your point, though, and follow it through,” Scott said, weighing in, and now curious. “You said they won’t be able to prove that the stuff was stolen, but on the same token how can we prove that it’s ours.”

An aproned waitress appeared tableside and they clammed up. She asked if they needed another pitcher. Peter said no for all of them, but maybe in a bit. She retreated back to the kitchen.

“You were saying how do we prove it’s ours,” Peter said, now sitting back and grinning. He stopped, letting them figure it out for themselves.

“You’re a piece of work,” Tim said, obviously having done so.

“What is it?” Scott turned to him.

“The disco photographer.”

“The disco photographer,” Peter echoed. “The guy documented the entire summer. We know he took photos of us. We posed for him. If we can find those photos, which I believe we can, we’ll have our proof.”

Tim wasn't convinced. Or, done arguing. "If he took pictures of us stashing the stuff, then he took pictures of us stealing it. You think they can't charge us?"

"Adults over twenty-two cannot be prosecuted for crimes they committed as a juvenile. And the statute of limitations for non-violent crime in New Jersey is five years. You're not going to jail for stealing someone's watch back when Jimmy Carter was president, Double T."

"But," Scott jumped in, "couldn't they use *those* photos to show that the gold didn't belong to us?"

"Again, Scott, how could they possibly track down the people who had their things stolen. It was more than forty years ago. Most of them are probably dead. There is no chance of finding the others. No chance. There is minimal risk here that it won't work, and the reward is through the roof. Gold was selling at four-fifty an ounce back then. I remember. You know what it is today?"

Tim leaned in again. "It's ugly, Peter. I have a reputation. I can't have my company know, my family know, that this was part of my life. This wasn't some random, one-and-done crime. We had a reputation. We were the 'Infamous Jersey Shore Pickpocket Ring of Nineteen Seventy-Nine.' That was a real headline. We're in the history book, though no one knows who we are." He paused. "If people find out, it'll bring me down."

He looked to Scott for support in telling Peter he was crazy. Scott wasn't as certain, though. "I don't know," he said, shaking his head. "I'm not saying I'm on-board, but it's certainly worth discussing."

"Party's over," Tim said, standing. He reached into his pocket and grabbed a pile of bills, tossing them onto the table. "I can't even be part of this conversation. You're crazy."

Peter reached out and grabbed his wrist, serious. Tim stopped, looking down at him. "Look, Tim. I'm doing this. I can do it without you. In fact, I figured this would be your reaction. I need this. For me. For Randy. I just didn't want to do anything without letting you know."

Tim sighed. "You're nuts."

He ignored the insult. "And, if I'm successful, I will cut you in on anything I get."

“No,” he said. Peter let go, and he turned to Scott. “Think twice about this, Scott. Think about what you want to leave behind as your story.”

With that, he walked out of the restaurant, none of them knowing if they’d ever see him again.

After a moment of settling in, Peter looked up at Scott. “I’m not looking for any kind of commitment right now. Plans are in motion, but there’s work to be done. Steps to take. But, I’m moving forward. If you want to be with me, I’d love to have you. But I don’t expect anything.”

“We can’t be arrested? The only risk is our reputation?”

“You can’t be arrested, Scott. Banish the thought.”

“Okay, I’ll think about it. But I need to hear this plan”

“Soon. We’ve got an opportunity here to end on a high note. I’m sad, and angry, that Randy can’t be here, because I know he’d be in.”

“I get being sad, but I don’t understand why you’re angry.”

“Let’s just call it timing.”

He nodded. “Like you should’ve done this a long time ago?”

“Something like that.”

Scott laughed. “I’m not so sure that Randy would have been as into this as you think.”

He held up his hands. “Let me rephrase... I *believe* he’d be in.”

“Maybe,” Scott muttered. Peter hadn’t been around Randy. Tenured teacher Randy was very different from the rascal he was as a kid.

Something occurred to him, and he looked up. “The pictures. You know who the disco photographer’s son is, don’t you?”

“Of course I do,” Peter said, then sat back in his seat and grinned.

## CHAPTER 2

Mayor Martin Ebel set the phone down on its cradle much more softly than he wanted to. Unable to maintain his forced show of professionalism, though, he then buried his head in his arms on the desk, the way they used to make you do it in kindergarten when the whole class was being reprimanded.

This time, it was truly about hiding. A few seconds to himself in the sanctity of his closed eyelids. Could anything else go wrong?

That sanctity was cut short, as he felt someone else in the office, and looked up to see his executive assistant, Abigail Terranova, standing on the other side of his desk. She was asking what was up using her eyes, clearly not wanting to add to his frustration.

“Water main leak,” he muttered, shaking his head.

She nodded. “I’ll call public works.”

“Is it me, Abby?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Is it just my bad luck? It’s one thing after another. It never seems to stop.”

“I think it’s just local government,” she said. Which was a good answer. With the current state of things, Martin was feeling himself slip into wallowing. Abby, who brought a fresh set of eyes, taking the job just about a year ago after getting her associate’s degree in Municipal Administration from nearby Ocean County College, was still about the science of government. She was getting sharper by the day politically, and hadn’t yet been tainted



by the frustrations of trying to make everyone happy. This wasn't the first time she'd brought the mayor down from an emotional ledge. "I'll get public for you," she said, and left the office.

Evaluating that his executive assistant was getting sharper politically was probably damning her with faint praise, because he had no qualifications to do so. Martin was about ten weeks away from becoming a one-term mayor for the Boro of Seaside Heights, trailing in the polls to a woman, a neighbor, he'd known for years, Miranda Sanderson-Cox, by eight points at last count. Pretty much an insurmountable number in a community with only about three thousand residents, with so little time left.

Martin had come to terms with the upcoming election loss a few weeks back, taking a Friday night and a bottle of wine on his back porch to let the reality sink in. His three-plus years in office hadn't been bad, but they hadn't been great, either. He'd talked often during his campaign about using newly authorized state tourism dollars to widen the marketing range for Seaside Heights Boardwalk, beach and nightlife to those within an eight-hour drive – adding population centers like Cleveland, Buffalo, Montreal and Raleigh to the targeting. The previous mayor, longtime pol James "Jimmy" Clayton, had passed away, leaving an open seat. Whether the tourism piece was important to voters or not, he'd won the election only after his opponent endured a last-minute PR catastrophe, paving his way into office.

Being a Democrat, Martin had the support of the state administration, and they were able to fast track the tourism money to him, helping him to fulfill his campaign promise. Problem was, it didn't work. The money spent yielded zero results he could point to, and coupled with an oddly-timed travel trend that had people going to forests and cabins instead of beaches for a time, the initiative was an unmitigated disaster. Normally, good politicians could hide poorly spent taxpayers' money, but Martin knew that no one had ever accused him of being good. Everyone turned on him, including his colleagues on the boro council, all the way up to the governor, who looked bad, herself, given the failure – a point that Republicans had used often in *her* campaign. Martin had

gone into a hole, still to recover. In fact, some of the funding still sat in the boro's coffers, but he'd been too timid to try to use it, and get slapped again.

Currently leading the public charge against him was his now-opponent, Sanderson-Cox, always said together, who had no real stake in the game beyond opportunity.

Sitting on his patio that muggy July evening downing an entire bottle of Pinot Noir, he'd decided on a different approach. Instead of embarrassing himself, trying to scrape by in an election he was clearly going to lose, he would spend his remaining days in office working to leave his mark. Do something positive that would last long after he's gone.

But like so many great ideas that manifest themselves while imbibing, it had stopped there. First, because he had no idea what that legacy was that he'd leave behind and, second, like this morning, everything was crumbling around him. Every day, it seemed he was waking up to some new calamity to wholly demand his attention...

Memorial Day weekend, the first truly busy weekend of each year for the area, an RV fishtailed on the Thomas Mathis Bridge on Rt. 37 – the only access across the Intercoastal Waterway to get to Seaside – and blocked it for two hours. Businesses sat waiting for their customers, who were stuck in their cars lined up back to the Garden State Parkway.

At the end of June, Tropical Storm Celia came through and, while the winds had already died down by the time it reached New Jersey, it left much of the community under water for forty-eight hours.

The second week of July, in what Martin should have just accepted was a sign from God, a 12-foot great white shark was spotted off-shore just south near Island Beach State Park. It was caught, tagged, released and not heard from again, but it naturally caused a great deal of fear among beachgoers, which was only just now starting to end.

Each of those things monopolized Martin's schedule, as would this water main break. In such a small community, news traveled fast, and anything that affected one or a small group of residents affected all of them.

Abby poked her head back into the office. “I talked to Angela. They’re on it.”

“Thank you, Abby.”

His eyes followed her out. He was thankful for her, not only because she did her job well, but because she was the only person in the George E. Tompkins Municipal Complex with whom he wanted to interact at this point. The six councilmembers, some of them friends for years, even decades, in the case of Sam Pinzino, could hardly make eye contact with him. Not because they didn’t like him. In fact, it was the opposite: they did like him, as a person, but were existing in this scenario that happens often in politics where you’re sad to see a colleague losing, but know you have to move on – mostly in hopes they didn’t bring you down with them. Same with the boro administration staff. Same with the police leadership, also in the building. He didn’t want their sympathy or faux respect, so he avoided all of them, best he could. Kept everything strictly business, as needed. Abby, tall, professional beyond her age and experience, and never accepting any bullshit, was a breath of fresh air.

His small office felt stuffy, so he stood, rolled up the sleeves of his dress shirt, and stepped out, letting Abby know he was walking over to the Boardwalk to grab something to eat. She instinctively looked at the time on her computer, since it was only 10:30 a.m., but understood the trip was more of the clearing-of-the-head variety.

Leaving the office, he stepped into the August heat, headed for the Boardwalk, just a block away. Stepping up the wooden ramp, he emerged into a light crowd – weekday traffic in Seaside in the summer was generally a mixture of vacationing New Yorkers, local families and kids from the neighborhoods up-and-down the Barnegat Peninsula. Mornings along the Boardwalk were always pleasant, and whenever he took the time to enjoy them, it brought back great memories of coming often with his mother and step-father. He smiled at a family walking past them, wishing them a good day.

Over here was a different atmosphere than at Boro Hall. Most of the business owners that had been so vehement towards him and his promises a few years before had now cooled. They were pleasant. To his face, at least.

Though he knew that the ones who actually lived in the area weren't lined up to vote for him. That was for certain. Still, he enjoyed talking with them as he always had, and of course wanted to see them all do well.

He walked slowly, nodding and waving to people he knew, depending on the distance away they were. He said hello to Samantha Matthews, sitting by the beach entrance checking badges for people headed down onto the sand. Like many of the pre-college teens up and down the Boardwalk, he'd helped Samantha get her job on behalf of her father, Alan, who owned a home on Bay Boulevard, looking west toward the Intercoastal. In a small community, there were plenty of people that Martin had helped in some way or another. Strangely, that help wasn't showing much return in the polls.

Eventually, he made his way north, dipping into a small candy shoppe to get a treat, but also secretly hoping that the owner was around. The young woman behind the counter recognized him when he entered – the only customer at the moment. “Good morning, Mr. Mayor.”

He quick glanced at her nametag, which she obviously caught, but he played it off, as though he was one hundred percent sure of her name. “Marissa,” he smiled. “Good to see you. Any chance that Connie is in today?”

“She's in the back. I'll get her.”

The young woman disappeared through a door in the back of the main room, and Martin scanned the display case for something that might catch him. He was thinking about a sausage sandwich for lunch, but it was too early. By the time Connie Walsh came out, he'd settled on a small bag of black licorice that was displayed on top of the glass.

“Mayor Ebel, how are you this morning?” Connie asked, coming around the counter and stopping a few feet from him. She was her usual harried self, red curly hair buried underneath a hairnet, hints of sweat covering her freckled cheeks, and chocolate streaks running up and down her apron.

“Oh, Connie, I didn't want to pull you away-”

She shook her head. “No, I needed a break. This heat wave is a killer. What can I do for you?”

“I’m actually just walking around this morning. Thought I’d pop in and get a treat for myself, and see if you had any updates on that parcel.”

“Moroni’s?”

“Yeah.” Moroni’s had been a fairly popular dining establishment on Sumner Avenue, just off the Boardwalk when, all of a sudden, the owners, two brothers, shuttered it and skipped town. No explanation. No phone call.

The boro, and the Citizens Advisory Committee, of which Connie was vice chair, had spent months hunting down the legalities of their disappearance. Eventually, they got a judge to say they could eminent domain the property, but only after they were gone for a year. Meanwhile, the property sat vacant and ugly in the middle of the tourist area.

Of course, Martin knew all of that. In fact, he was as up-to-date as Connie could have been. Asking about the building was a ruse. Over the past several months, he’d used every opportunity to stop in and see her. Call it a lingering schoolboy crush, but they’d known each other for most of their lives, and after she divorced, as he was finding himself more and more in political peril, she’d become a rare source of comfort and familiarity for him.

Martin was essentially alone, and lately felt the weight of it. His mother had passed away nearly twenty years before, following shortly thereafter by his step-father, who’d raised him. His biological father, Richard, had passed away in Florida about ten years before. He had a step-sister, who also happened to live in Florida, that he had the best of intentions to keep in touch with, but rarely did. Connie and her daughters, when they were around, had been nice to him – nice enough that he wanted more of it. But he was sure that Connie had no idea that his visits weren’t always about the vanilla malt.

She shook her head. “We haven’t talked about it several weeks. Though somebody said they heard Kelly got hold of the one brother.” Kelly Hanover, borough council president, owner with her husband, Keith, of Pirates Cove Mini-Golf, and the loudest voice on the issue – the person most aggressively hunting down answers.

“Really?”

“I don’t know what that means, but it’s something.”

The door chimed and a brunette with a little boy entered. They perused the chocolates.

“There’s a lot of problems with that building, Martin. Even if we’re successful in getting it, I don’t know that it’s usable.”

Maybe he didn’t know as much as she did. “What kinds of problems?”

“You name it. Pipes are busted. HVAC is damaged. Fortunately, there doesn’t seem to be a rodent problem – that’s thanks to the help of the neighbors. I can’t imagine someone’s going to commit to making the investment themselves. Maybe knock it down and start over.”

“What if we put together some public money? It’s an important location.”

Connie glanced at the customer and started to ask if she needed anything, but Marissa jumped in. She returned to the conversation, “Maybe that could work. That’s a long way’s off, though. What are you grinning at?”

“I was wondering when you turned into such a development expert.”

She laughed and waved him off. “Oh, please. I’ve learned more than I could ever have wanted to learn on that crazy committee. One more year, and I’m done.”

“We’re lucky to have you.”

She smiled wryly and repeated slowly, “One more year, and I’m done.”

What a great smile. He matched it, but then his phone buzzed in his pocket, and he excused himself from the conversation for a moment. It was a text from Abby:

**THERE’S A GENTLEMAN HERE TO SEE YOU. PETER BLYTHE?**

He searched for the name, but came up with nothing. He must have had a confused look on his face, because Connie asked, “Everything okay?”

He snapped to. “Yes. I’m sorry, yes. I have to get back.

“I need to get those truffles moving, anyway,” she said, pulling away and heading for the back. “Thanks for stopping in. Always good to see you.”

“Yes,” he muttered, his head already back at the office.

## CHAPTER 3

Gold?” the mayor repeated. Peter nodded his head. “Under the boardwalk?”

“The pieces are probably not all in good shape, but it’s gold and gold doesn’t decay. It’s in there.”

“And you know of this how?”

“I am aware of who put it there.” He’d chosen his words carefully ahead of time.

Mayor Ebel sat back in his seat, thinking. Peter smiled to himself. He didn’t need to say another word – he already had him. A small-town politician about to get swamped in his upcoming election, when a mysterious stranger comes into his office and lets him know there’s buried treasure sitting two blocks away from him? Ebel realized already that unearthing it would yield national news. And Peter knew that he’d already bought in. His brain was already trying to come up with a way to translate such a find into votes.

“Where’d this gold come from? Whose was it?”

“I can’t say.”

“And how do you know about it?”

Peter shrugged. “It started out as an urban legend. It interested me, so I did some research. Talked to people. I’ve done pretty much everything I can up to climbing underneath the Boardwalk and putting a shovel in the ground. But it’s been years. One of my sources passed away recently, which rekindled my interest.”

“Who was that?”

Now, he smiled, and sat up in his chair, leaning in. “Mr. Mayor,” he said slowly, “I believe you can appreciate

where we are right now. If you are interested, I'll tell you everything you need to know. If not, it's probably best if I keep my knowledge to myself for now."

"You won't be able to just start digging on the beach without my approval."

He sat back again. "Then it stays there. I'm trying to help *you*." He knew he was being smug, but hoped that Ebel couldn't see the culmination of a plan forty years in the making on his face. If he could, he didn't show it, so Peter leaned forward. "Mind if we take a walk?"

Ebel looked at him deeply for a moment, then stood and held his hand out toward his office door.

\*\*\*

They walked the exact route Martin had taken just a couple hours before when he'd escaped the office. Only this time, there was actual purpose to the trip.

A few things ran through his head as this man, who'd introduced himself as Peter Blythe, "currently" living in Chicago but having grown up in Toms River:

First, if Blythe wasn't full of shit, perhaps a turn of good luck was headed his way – finding treasure, as storybook as it might seem, beneath the Seaside Heights beach would dominate the local news cycle well past Election Day. If the current mayor was the one who dug it up, it would carry significant political capital.

Second, while he carried a great deal of skepticism that it was, indeed, true, he would have to play the situation right from the start, to ensure that the community benefited, there were no negative implications attached to the find, and when everyone – including other elected officials representing the area – came rushing in for their piece of the attention, it was Mayor Martin Ebel standing there doling it out.

And third, something deep in his memory was telling him that he knew this story, and why there might be gold hidden under the sand beneath the Boardwalk. Though he couldn't place the exact scenario. As powerful as #1 and #2 were, it was *this* that was driving him to follow this Blythe guy.



They stepped up onto the Boardwalk to find a lunch crowd that was thicker than it had been earlier. Everything was still very casual – the crazier population wouldn't show up until after dinnertime. Martin acknowledged a few more people he knew as they made a right and walked.

“How's your campaign going?” Blythe asked.

“The fact that you're from Chicago and you know I have a campaign going on tells me you know exactly how it's going.” He looked up at the man, who was smiling. “Why are you here?”

Despite temporarily going along with whatever Blythe was up to, Martin didn't trust him one iota. He'd been reading him from the moment he'd returned to his office and they'd been introduced. Clearly, he was up to something, making Martin wonder what rabbit hole he was headed down. Blythe had obviously spent his life as a salesman, because he carried that vibe, talking fast, lots of gestures and pressure, but with a persistent yet slight smile. Luck had turned its back on his tenure as mayor, and this was the most promising thing that had crossed his desk in a long time.

After a short while, Blythe stopped, peering out toward the ocean, then up-and-down the Boardwalk, measuring his position against the businesses.

“Hello Mr. Mayor,” a voice called from behind them.

He turned to find one of the councilmembers, Davis Jamieson, walking toward him, and quickly waved in rote response in an effort to ward him off. It didn't work, and Jamieson approached.

“I saw you earlier,” he said. “Not used to see you out here roaming the Boardwalk in the middle of the afternoon. You alright?”

Jamieson had been one of Martin's supporters and reliable votes on the council when he was first elected – he'd first been elected just two years before. He was one of the few who had moderately stayed by his side. Kind of. The two of them were the “younger” faces in borough government, though both were in their forties.

“Yeah. You know, some days the office gets stuffy.” Jamieson was looking at Martin's walking partner. He had no choice. “Davis, this is Peter Blythe, from Chicago.”

Blythe halted his tracking efforts and stepped to them, smiling and extending his hand.

“What brings you here from Chicago?” Jamieson greeted, accepting the handshake.

“Oh, I grew up in Toms River,” he said, motioning with his head toward the west. “Long time ago. I’m just back... Reminiscing. A lot’s changed.”

“Well, some of it’s still the same. I’m sure a few of the businesses you knew are still here.”

“I’ve already got my favorite pizza,” he beamed. “You’re not wrong.”

“Good. Hope you enjoy yourself.” Jamieson turned to Martin. “Thanks for getting on that water main break. Mrs. Chang called me from California. Said her daughter is arriving to the house today, and it needs to be cleaned up by then.”

Martin laughed. “Yes, she left a message for me, as well.”

Jamieson fake punched the mayor in the ribs. “I’m going to hold *you* responsible for that half-hour I had to spend on the phone with her, then.”

“Fair enough.” He wanted him to leave. Martin was very uncomfortable standing there, for why they were there.

“Well, I won’t hold you up,” he said, taking a step away, before stopping and pointing at Martin. “I will call you next week about that zoning request on Fremont. I don’t know if I can support it.”

“I think I’m with you on that. We’ll talk.”

“Peter?” he said, now a dozen paces away. “Enjoy your time here.”

Blythe gave a half-wave, and then they were alone again. Martin sidled over to him. “Is this it?”

He was nodding. “Yes, it should be right under our feet here.”

“That won’t be easy to investigate without causing all kinds of commotion,” Martin thought out loud.

“No, it won’t.”

They stood in silence for a moment, Martin contemplating possible courses of action, and Blythe standing by, waiting to see how far the mayor would be

willing to go. Martin could feel his silent encouragement, which actually seemed to be causing him to put up a wall. He wanted it too much. While he gave a show of thinking about planning, he stopped to consider who this man was and why he was here, strictly from his presentation so far and demeanor. He was getting older, and was worried about losing something important to him. Martin found he had no doubt there was a story beneath the sand there – Blythe wouldn't have made this effort if it was just a theory. In many ways, it didn't matter what it was. It was fodder that he could use. But would it cause him to sink or swim?

Finally, he turned to Blythe. "I'm willing to put some resources toward this," he said. "But I have to think about how it rolls out. Who's involved, and what it means."

He shrugged. "Makes sense to me." Martin was hoping for a stronger reaction.

"You'll be around?"

"Oh, yeah," he said. "I'm not going anywhere. This is my homecoming. I'll be spending time this week with some friends and family. Right here if you need me."

"What are you looking for out of this? Finder's fee or something?"

"What are you? About forty? Forty-two? When you get to be my age, Mayor, you'll see. I know you're going to go back to your office and check me out. You need to, of course. I recommend that you start with my LinkedIn. See what my professional life has been. One job after another after another. A couple wives. No kids that I know of – though, of course, that's not on LinkedIn. I want to leave something behind. Something of value." He paused. "The man who died recently, the one who knew about this, was a friend of mine. We haven't been close in many, many years, and I regret that. If this is real, I hope you'll be willing to talk about what it means for me. At the least, though, if at some point there's a newspaper article that says, 'Peter Blythe was responsible for this important find'... Well, that's something."

It was a well-rehearsed speech. Enough so that Martin allowed a twinge of empathy in for the man. He was right, he did have a different perspective on things than Martin did. Unfortunately, he could see himself headed right

down the same path, ending up standing on the Boardwalk in Seaside Heights trying to salvage a legacy to leave behind. He'd screwed up his relationship with his first love because he was pig-headed. He'd foregone an opportunity early in his career to join a friend in a business venture (who was now probably on a yacht somewhere), opting for the safety of a public job. The only reason he had a house in Seaside was because he inherited some money from his grandmother right about time of the housing crash – at this point, ironically, he wouldn't even be able to afford a house in the community he presided over. Becoming mayor had been his chance to make a mark, and now he was flubbing that. Though he didn't want to, he had to take Blythe's sentiments on face value, because he could sense them in himself. "Okay," he muttered.

Blythe held out a business card for him, which he took. "Here's how you can get hold of me. I do hope that you'll allow me to be here for the dig."

Martin scanned the card – "Peter Blythe, Salesman" – still lost in his thoughts, then looked up. "Of course," he stammered, nodding his head. "Yes, I would want you here."

He clapped his hands. "I'm excited," he said. "Can I buy you a drink, Mayor?"

Martin laughed. "No, unfortunately, it's not good practice for a campaigning mayor to be seen at the bar in the middle of work. But maybe we can catch up again later in the week?"

"That's perfect. I'll let you get back to your day." He looked around. "Meanwhile, I'm going to grab something to eat and go stick my toes in the ocean. It's been a long time."

The mayor nodded. "Well, hopefully the beach brings back some nice memories."

Blythe let out a breath. "I'm sure it will."

\*\*\*

After the mayor was out of sight, Peter finally relaxed his body, slumping onto one of the wooden benches

lining the Boardwalk, his back to the ocean. He listened to the surf come in and, like Ebel had indicated, it did bring back many memories. He closed his eyes to enjoy it, the midday sun pounding on him from above.

In his solitude, he was a kid again, playing on the beach with his family in the summer sun, his mom bringing him and his sister, Delilah, during the week while his dad was working up in the city. Long days for him, with a two-hour commute in the morning and evening to his warehouse job – he actually to this day had no idea exactly what his father had done on a daily basis. Something about ball bearings. But he was tired when he got home, and he was still tired on the weekends. Peter had wanted to show his dad all the fun stuff at the beach, but after a long week, spending time here was the last thing on his mind. They had a good life, and they were close, but their family time together was spent at home, working on the yard or remodeling parts of the house. The beach held two memories for him – his mom lugging the blankets and picnic basket across the hot sand so he and Delilah could play, and the endless hours he spent underneath the Boardwalk, in that very spot, with his best friends, planning their futures. Their wealthy futures.

It hadn't happened, thanks to that one jeweler, who'd put an end to it. Peter thought back, knowing that he'd been hard on the man, David, when the fall of their empire hadn't been completely his fault. But his pushing back that one night when he'd tried to sell the stolen engagement ring had caused his partners-in-crime to bolt. They were done that night. For some reason, the increased police presence at Seaside, sneaking around and living a separate life from the one their families and friends knew about, even the actual close-up theft of people's valuables – those things didn't scare them. But a jeweler producing them a hand-written flyer that had presumably been distributed by the police? After that, none of them would go back near the cache. Avoided it like a plague. Peter's greatest frustration in life.

Peter, himself, had been lost, with his team having abandoned him, and before he could regroup, the summer had ended, and they were back in school. He often entertained the notion of checking back in –

especially once he learned about the state's laws regarding juvenile crimes and statute of limitations. He knew that once they hit 22 years old, they couldn't be prosecuted for the crimes, so his plan had turned into the long game, whether the rest of them were in it with him or not. Only problem was, by the time he hit his 22<sup>nd</sup> birthday, he was gone. Out west, following some girl that he couldn't even remember her name to Laguna Beach. She wanted to be an actress, and he was the supportive boyfriend helping her to reach her dreams. He knew it would be short-lived, and he'd be back to finish his plan. But he never got back.

Despite the value of what was in the pit beneath him, he believed at the time that he'd put the plan into effect "soon." But soon turned into months into years and, sadly, into decades, each New Year's Eve Peter trying to convince himself that this was the year it was going to happen. He'd corral his buddies for a trip home, and they'd dig up their treasure. Inevitably, something would come up, and it wouldn't happen.

He did consider often throughout the years that it was his own fear that was keeping him away. The whole thing had seemed so easy, when they were nimble teenagers sneaking under the Boardwalk. They would just go back and get the stuff at their leisure. But, as he could see around him now, four decades worth of construction projects on the Boardwalk, and weathering and shifting of the dunes, not to mention Hurricane Sandy, which he knew had decimated the entire area – the photo of Seaside's famous roller coaster sitting in the ocean had spurred him to e-mail his buddies in disbelief – knowing that access to their treasure was not quite as simple as he'd imagined.

Thus, the new plan. And Ebel was hooked.

Peter opened his eyes as his stomach growled. The smells coming from the various restaurants and stands were unavoidable, and he was excited to dive in.

First, though, he reached into his shirt and pulled out the gold chain he'd worn around his neck since the 1970s. Dangling from it was an engagement ring – the very ring he'd tried to sell that fateful night, getting him rebuffed by the jeweler. To the annoyance of any woman he'd

dated or married in the past forty years, he'd kept it on his person at all times, a reminder of what could've have been and, more importantly, what would be again. He felt it in his fingers for a moment, looking down between the slats on the Boardwalk. He could only see shadow, but he knew the sand was about three feet below, and then below that was his stuff.

His stuff. Which he was now going to get back.

Tucking the chain and ring back into his shirt, he stood to follow the tempting smells of Jersey Shore cuisine.

## CHAPTER 4

Martin couldn't figure it out.

There was some story from his youth about a treasure trove of valuables buried on the beach at Seaside, but he couldn't place it, even after a couple hours of sitting on his deck, no noise to distract him. Just trying to reach into the far recesses of his brain.

He knew the story had been told to him when he was very young, but what was confusing him was he wasn't sure who'd told him. The likely source would've been his uncle, who lived in North Jersey, but visited "the Shore" often – he was a master storyteller, the kind who would gather everyone around at a party for an anecdote at any given moment, and captivate them for the next fifteen minutes. But he wasn't making a connection there.

His step-father, David, who'd married his mom when he was five years old, was a jeweler, so it's possible that he would've had such a story in his arsenal. But his "Pop," as he called him, didn't talk much about work, especially with a little kid, except during the summer after graduation, when he worked part-time at the shop with him. Would he have said something then, those days when they were at the store, just the two of them?

That left his father, who in a way was the opposite of his brother, the master storyteller. Richard, who when Martin was a kid and after his parents had already split,



would spend most days roaming the beach at Seaside taking photos, and would tell his share of stories, but be so blasé about them that everything came across as matter-of-fact. Martin's uncle? Could describe a man walking down the street and make it Pulitzer-worthy. Martin's dad, after he moved to Florida in the late-80s, once nabbed a beautiful photo of the space shuttle from Jupiter Inlet that was so good NASA bought it from him. His report via e-mail: "Sold one of my photos to the government a few weeks ago."

So, the likelihood was that it was his father that told him something about valuables buried in the sand at the beach, because while the story was stuck in his brain somehow, it didn't resonate. It made him think about the volumes of photos that he had sitting in his den, pictures he'd pulled from his father's apartment in Florida when he'd passed away a little over a decade before. He'd been taking pictures so long that his collection was almost an evolution of photography from the '60s to the 2010s – every format possible. Martin had gotten closer with his father toward the end than he had ever been – cell phones had made keeping in touch so much easier and cheaper – and for the last several years he'd held a desire to go through the photo catalog and see for himself the story his father had told. Maybe even help roll it out to a new audience today, and help him continue to tell that story. But it was an insurmountable task. A half-century's worth of pictures. He'd never been able to begin.

At one point during this campaign, he'd considered digging in to try to find the photos he'd taken of the beach all those years. Put them together in some sort of historical collage for some cheap pop. Maybe get to some of the old-timers who've been in Seaside their whole lives, and try to pull some emotional votes. In an election where only a few hundred voted, an eight percent deficit really was just a few dozen people. Which should give anyone hope, but unfortunately Martin's numbers were headed in the wrong direction. Even so, sitting there as the clock ticked past 11 p.m., a string of lights stretching from his house to the deck railing illuminating the area and the sounds of Boardwalk entertainment in the distance, he made a note to think about the photo idea again.

He'd done a little research on Peter Blythe, and everything he'd told him in-person had checked out. His career, growing up locally and being included in the graduation list from Toms River South High School. A Google search had yielded a few additional results: he'd been named "Salesman of the Year" for a digital advertising company he worked for in Seattle in 2013; two marriage announcements, one in the archives of a community newspaper in Cleveland in 1987, the other in Los Angeles in 2007; and an op-ed he'd published in a suburban Chicago weekly fairly recently opposing a proposed new methadone clinic, presumably near his home. Other than that, not much.

Could he trust the guy? Probably not. But could he use him to support a last-ditch effort to hold onto his job? He thought he could.

He shook his head, sitting there alone. Thinking of his role as mayor as his job put a lump in his throat. It was a responsibility he enjoyed, took very seriously, and prided himself on. But, yes, it was also his job, and his source of income. Until a few months ago, he'd considered it to be his long-term gig, as many mayors might do. Now, just weeks before the election, it had crept into his mind what he would do with the rest of his life if the current numbers held true. He wasn't going back to the state's legislative offices to be an operative, and he didn't know who in the state administration would be willing to give him a bureaucratic job, so he could hang in for a while and clear a few additional pension tiers. The private sector, frankly, scared him a bit, only because it had been a long time since he'd given it a go. Somewhere in the recesses of his ambition, the idea of starting a business on the Boardwalk, itself, interested him, and he'd learned a lot from his constituents over time. Perhaps they might be willing to offer him some tutelage. Especially Connie.

Over which time, he'd learned that Connie's husband had left her and her two daughters, one of whom, Laura, worked at the shop with her during the summer, about four years ago. Fortunately, she got everything, including the house in Pine Beach, where they lived, and the candy store, which she'd inherited operation of from her now-

retired father, who'd left for and still lived in West Palm. He was genuinely happy to see her doing so well with the business, but could tell it was a lot on her own. He hadn't dared ask – they weren't to that stage yet – but he suspected she was looking at her kids eventually out of the house, and what might be next.

Were they kindred spirits, both looking at the possibility of change in their futures? Did she have any clue that he thought about her outside of the candy shoppe?

Feeling the lateness of the hour, Martin stood, shut down the outdoor lights, and locked up. Closing the glass door to his deck behind him, the sounds of the Boardwalk disappeared, leaving him in the quiet of his darkly lit first floor.

He set the glass he'd been drinking from in the sink and dimmed the kitchen light. Before turning in, he moved to the bureau, where, still, volumes of photos from his father's collection sat, untouched.

He picked up a package and dropped the prints and negatives into his open hand, rifling through them. These were family photos, some random party the Ebels had had back in what looked like the early '70s. His mom and dad were both at their thinnest, and looked to be in love, using salt and pepper shakers as microphones in some backyard somewhere. It brought back some pleasant thoughts for him, and he smiled as he stuffed the pictures back into their envelope.

He sifted through three or four more envelopes, which did nothing but remind him of why he hadn't tackled the project – none of the ones he'd randomly chosen had anything to do with Seaside Heights. They were in there somewhere, but tonight wasn't the night. Restoring the pile, he went to bed and fell asleep thinking about buried treasure.

## CHAPTER 5

Scott had a count in his head. For a few years now, he'd built his retirement plans not around a timeline or deadline, but around a number. At one point, he'd said he would hang up his spikes after selling 25 more houses. That number was now down to seven, and every time he took on a new client, he wondered how he would handle it when he hit the mark.

He wasn't in a rush, certainly, which in a way made him question himself as to how badly he wanted it. He liked what he did on a daily basis, and he was paid well for it. He'd long passed the phase in a realtor's life where he'd taken any house that came along. At this point in his career, he only took on the ones that he wanted – with the rare exception when a friend or former client came to him for his expertise. With his reputation and clout, it wasn't worth putting the time into something that was either going to have a hard time selling or not be lucrative. But, in his defense, he'd put the effort into it. Earned his money, and his reputation. Which is why his face was on billboards all over South Jersey.

Today's home he was showing in Barnegat was the kind he liked. Fifteen years old. Popular, growing neighborhood. The family that owned it, whose last of three children had just graduated from college, hadn't made many updates, so there was still some room to operate for a buyer who like to customize. The owners were motivated to sell, as they'd already signed a contract on their relocation in Amelia Island, Florida. Housing

market was solid. Scott anticipated he'd have multiple bidders by the end of the day.

As he was straightening a decorative bowl on the mantle, he heard the front door open behind him. It was a few minutes early, before the open house started, but if someone had a checkbook in their hand, Scott wasn't going to make them wait for the official start.

He was surprised, however, instead of a prospective buyer, to find Peter standing in the foyer, looking around, taking in the home.

"Nice place," he said, already with that grin on his face for knowing he'd startled his friend.

Scott let out a sigh. "Yes, it is. Are you in the market?"

Peter laughed and shook his head. "I'm not a putting down roots kind of guy. But if I was, this would be a great house. Is there a pool?"

"There is, yes. What are you doing here?"

"You didn't answer my e-mails."

"I'm busy."

Peter walked further into the house, standing facing him in the living room. "I know that. And I really didn't want to bother you, but we need to talk. I've got everything set in motion."

Scott leaned in. "Everything, what?"

"The mayor. I've got him hooked."

"Hooked on what?" He was trying to figure out how to cordially ask his friend to leave. Even after all these years, as charismatic as he was, himself, he was no match for Peter. Especially given the loss they'd all experienced that week. He didn't want to push him away. It wasn't hard to read that Peter needed this – whatever he was chasing. Fortunately, no one else had shown up yet. But they would shortly. He didn't want him here when they did.

Peter widened his eyes, willing him to understand without having to say it, but finally gave up. "The gold."

He was dumbfounded. "You're serious about that?"

"Why wouldn't I be?" he almost looked hurt.

"Peter, it's—" He was interrupted as the front door opened. He looked up to see a husband and wife, mid-30s, come through the door and immediately start looking around. They were both attractive and fit, and Scott thought he spied a hint of a baby bump on the woman.

The man sported a Bulova watch, and both wore designer shoes. Despite being in the middle of a conversation with Peter that he didn't want to be in, his mind immediately sketched out the route he would take them around the house. The bedrooms would play well with these folks, as would the backyard and pool area. He'd start there. They'd make an offer. First, he had to get rid of Peter, though. "Now's not the time," he continued. "I have to work now. If you want to grab a drink later, I'll meet you then."

Without a word, Peter nodded and turned, acknowledging the young couple on his way out.

Scott took a deep breath, slapped a smile on his face, and extended his hand. "Good afternoon. I'm Scott Belanger. Welcome to your new home."

\*\*\*

"You're making me wonder if I should be seen with you," Scott said, approaching the table where Peter was sitting.

He snickered. "Finally, after all these years, your head's on straight."

That got him to smile as he sat down across from him. "Thanks for not making a scene."

"Was that a possibility? Did you think I would?"

Scott shrugged. "I never know with you."

"Did you sell the house?"

"Seven offers. Got a bidding war going on."

"And you like being a realtor? Still, after all these years?" Peter caught the server's eye across the patio and motioned to her.

"Sure," Scott said, nodding, if not enthusiastically. "It's been a good living. I enjoy the people and the challenge."

"How long will you keep doing it?"

"Did you invite me here to ask me about my retirement plan?"

Peter laughed as the server came to the table. "How about an Old Fashioned? And..." He pointed to Scott.

"Sounds good."

“Two, please.” The woman nodded and left. Peter looked up again. “No, I didn’t invite you here to talk about your retirement plan. I was luring you into a relaxed position with small talk. You’re in sales, aren’t you?”

He put his hands up. “I may have had a good career, but I was never the salesman you were. I’ve always known that my best chance of not just going along with you was to just avoid you altogether.”

Peter leaned in. “Then, what are you doing here?”

“Not sure.” He shrugged. “Maybe trying to talk you out of whatever you’re thinking.”

“Probably won’t happen.”

“I know.” He glanced over to the bar where their drinks were being made. It was a beautiful day to be sitting outside. Even better, when he’d calculated the commission he’d earn from one afternoon’s work, just at the asking price and before the bidding ended. “It’s a great story, Peter. A *great* story. But it’s over now. We had an amazing summer that year. It shaped us as people. At this point, there’s no need to revisit it. It’s been forty years.”

“We had a deal.”

“No,” he said calmly, shaking his head. “We didn’t. You might’ve had a deal. As soon as that jeweler told us we were being watched, it was done. We walked. All of us.”

“Not me.”

“Yes, you.”

“Well, when you weren’t with me anymore.” The server returned with their drinks, setting one in front of each of them. She offered them a menu for food, which they refused, then left with a promise to check in on them. “It wasn’t going to work without all of us. Wasn’t the same.”

Scott sipped from his Old Fashioned. They’d done a nice job on it. “Wasn’t the same? Like, it was about the game? Peter, we were going to be caught. Our lives would have been seriously different if that had happened.”

“Would that have been such a bad thing?”

The question caught Scott off-guard. He knew Peter was dealing with some degree of life disappointment, and didn’t want to tread on it. He was shaky and, frankly, not knowing what he’d do to exacerbate a situation that

incriminated all of them, didn't want to allow emotions to get high, and push him in any direction. "Who knows?" he said. Not the answer he wanted to give.

Peter sat back. "I'd have rather lived my life knowing I saw something through to completion than having given up."

"Doesn't look like you've given up."

"I can't, Scott. I can't give up."

"I know. You said that the other day."

He waved him off. "Yeah, that was the alcohol talking. This is me sitting here, now. I'm scared, Scott."

"Scared of what?"

"Scared of leaving nothing behind. I've lived my life as a nomad. That's not what I ever envisioned. In my twenties, sure. I wanted to travel. See the country. The world. But then a decade ticked away. Then another. I'm in this cycle. Make money, spend it. Build a relationship with a woman, dump it. Find a new home, leave it. I know that probably all means nothing to you, but it's very real to me. You don't understand what it's like having unfinished business just sitting there. Just sitting there."

"So, it's not about the gold?"

He sighed. "I'd be lying if I told you the gold had nothing to do with it. But, primarily, no. It's about the achievement. It's about finishing something. Something that I promised I'd finish."

Scott took another sip and leaned in again, pointing at him. "So, you think that if – you said you roped in the mayor – if you get him to dig up that hole, that you, we, get to keep whatever's in there?"

"Short of any deal we might make with him for doing the work, I don't see any other scenario. It's ours."

"It's not ours."

"It is, Scott." He adjusted his seat and went into explanation mode. "Well, let me clarify. At best, it's ours. We put it there. At worst, it belongs to no one, and is just hanging out there in the wind. So, the borough digs it up, keeps it, and we ask for a finder's fee."

"You'll just let that happen?"



“Well, no,” he shook his head. “I believe we can make the legal case that it belongs to us. But nothing’s guaranteed.”

“And the link to *how* we got it? People aren’t going to be happy about that.”

“Why does anyone have to know about that?” He paused, looking eye-to-eye with him for a long moment. “Honestly, Scott. Why does it even have to come up?”

“You don’t really believe that people are just going to let it go. That this stuff just accumulated out of nowhere.”

“People can come up with any theories they want. There is no proof of anything.”

“But Tim and I have-”

“Reputations, I know. That’s why I’m doing it myself. And, like I said, I will still cut you in. And Randy’s family.”

Scott was having a crisis of conscience. On one hand, he wanted nothing to do with what Peter was doing. It was dangerous, and there was little good that could come of it. On the other, Peter was his friend, and as reckless as he was being, he didn’t want to leave him alone. It had been more meaningful than he’d anticipated when he’d seen him for the first time in decades at the funeral, and he cherished the long drunken evening they’d had afterwards. With no children, he wasn’t exactly flourishing with a legacy to leave behind, himself – you can’t take billboards with you. While he wanted to fight back, there was something in Peter’s ambitions that captured him, as well.

“It’s already set in motion?” he said.

Peter nodded. “The mayor’s taken the bait. No doubt he’s trying to figure out how to do it right now.”

“He plays an interesting role in all of this. Did you fill him in on his unique piece of this puzzle?”

He was shaking his head, knowing where Scott was headed. “No. Not yet.”

“Do you intend to?”

He looked off past Scott toward nothing specific. “It’s probably inevitable. Well, the photos, definitely, because we need them. None of this works without them.”

“How do you know they still exist?” The most obnoxious smile crossed Peter’s face. Scott winced. “You’ve been working on this for longer than you’re

telling, haven't you? You've got it all figured out." He paused, waiting for the reveal. Instead, Peter sat back smugly. "Are you going to fill me in?"

"When you have probably tens of thousands of dollars' worth of gold buried somewhere, and you know that someone took pictures of it, wouldn't you keep tabs on that person?"

"Really?"

Peter laughed. "It wasn't hard. The guy was obsessed with online photography forums. He was in a bunch. He was kind of curmudgeonly and kept breaking the rules and getting thrown out, but he'd come back in under another name and I'd figure out who he was. We actually had many conversations over the years. Became friends, even. He had no idea that we had a connection."

"Online forums? Geez. You know enough about photography to join a forum?"

He laughed again. "No, not really. But I held my own."

"So, what did he say?" Their drinks were empty, but they paid no attention.

"He was complaining. This was, like, had to be twelve, thirteen, fifteen years ago, when these kinds of message boards were popular. He said that he had volumes of pictures from the past few decades and was asking if anyone would be willing to go through them. Said he wasn't confident his kid would ever do it. If I remember correctly, he was pretty sick at the time – getting near the end. I think he went into Hospice down in South Florida a little while later."

"Did he have takers?"

"Oh yeah, a bunch – including me."

"You offered?"

"Abso-fucking-lutely. If I'd had control over that whole collection?"

"So, what happened?"

"Well, a couple weeks later, he came back on and said he'd talked to his son in New Jersey, who'd promised to do it."

"That's Ebel, right?"

Peter nodded.

"And did he do it?"

"I'm guessing not, because he didn't immediately know what I was talking about. If he'd seen the pictures from around that time, he'd know for certain."

"He had no idea?"

"I'm not going to say he had *no* idea. I could see his wheels turning while I talked. But it wasn't an instant realization. But I'd lay money on him having those pictures."

Scott was thinking about the story, going over it in his head. That Peter would've tracked down the photographer from the beach wasn't a big surprise. In fact, it was par for the course. What was on Scott's mind was how his friend kept rolling out new details, and what else he was hanging on to for dramatic purposes. "The photographer, then, passed away, yes?"

Peter nodded, melancholy. "Yes. I was actually pretty sad at the time. He seemed like a good guy."

He decided he wasn't going to let him sit on information. "What about the mayor's step-father? Did you track him down, too?"

Now, Peter picked up his glass and looked around. "She said she was going to come back and check on us."

"Peter..."

He paused, showing his cards. "Nope. No clue."

"Is there something more I should know?"

He shook his head. "Nope," he repeated. "Nothing to see there."

Scott knew better than to push. He'd let it lie for now.

"I'm going to find her." He picked up Scott's glass and started for the bar.

He waved him off, though, standing himself. "No, one is fine. I have somewhere to be."

"No, you don't."

"Thanks, Peter, for keeping me informed. I wish you the best of luck."

Peter stopped, frustrated, but simply nodded.

Scott turned and headed for his car.

## CHAPTER 6

Martin winced as Jerry pulled out another tray of old coins. This guy was serious.

His new friend, Jerry, no last name given, was a collector, and ran one of two metal detecting shops Ocean County. Martin had found him online, and had changed his original plans for the evening to drive out to Jackson and pick his brain. What he hadn't expected was a museum-quality tour of forty years of treasure hunting.

On his calendar, Martin's night was supposed to be spent making some campaign phone calls. Seaside Heights was a different kind of community for campaigning, as walking door-to-door to talk to people was a crapshoot in the summer. Many homeowners were not in town this time of year, opting to make some return on their investment by renting their places out – especially the past several years with the advent of Airbnb and other online rental services. He'd heard over time that many of them could make enough to pay off their full year's mortgage just between Memorial Day and Labor Day – something that he'd be considering looking into should he lose in November and need income. But, since the people who could actually vote for him generally weren't around, he had built a strong list of cell phone numbers. Rather than knocking on their doors, he needed to get them that way, no matter where they were across the country.

He'd gotten home from the office and warmed up pasta and meatballs he hadn't finished from earlier in the

week, then had settled in, staring at the list. But he was unbelievably distracted, his conversation with Peter Blythe still rattling around his brain from the day before. He wanted to know more, but he felt paralyzed, almost. Not because he was unsure about moving forward – he'd convinced himself throughout the day that the effort was worth the gamble. What was the worst that could happen? He embarrasses himself and loses the election? That was already happening.

No, he was stymied because he knew he needed to involve other people, and he wasn't sure how to securely do that. He couldn't just show up on the beach and start digging. He needed Public Works to get involved. But just because he'd bought in didn't mean that *they* would. And the idea of a treasure buried in the sand brought all kinds of implications with it. The wider the circle got, the more precautions would need to be taken. There were questions of ownership, rights, and security. For the boro and for him, personally, there were plusses and minuses, challenges and opportunities. He wanted to do it right, and that had kept him quietly thinking at his desk all day not only about a strategy, but about who he might be able to trust.

In the end, the pull of wanting to know more had superseded the responsibility of making the phone calls he'd scheduled to make. He'd also convinced himself to see how much he could learn on his own, and his mind went to metal detectors – an area he'd always found interesting, but had never explored. He didn't know a thing about them. He was aware it was legal to metal detect on the beach, but that there were rules, which he didn't know. The conversation in his head had led him to Google, where he found Historic Treasures, LLC and Jerry.

Ninety minutes had passed since Martin had started asking questions. He'd gotten a few pointers, including some pricing on the dozen or so different detectors Jerry had in the shop, and a general rule of thumb in New Jersey that anything over 100 years old was essentially off-limits. But then the meeting had turned into a tour of Jerry's collection, which was impressive to the mayor's amateur eye, but a little much. He'd shown him jewelry, coins,

tobacco tins and his pride and joy, a gold doubloon he'd found underneath the shallow surf on the coast of North Carolina.

Martin was trying to remain respectful and interested, but mostly he just wanted to grab one of the detectors and head back to Seaside. "You said not to dig up anything over 100 years old, but a lot of these things are older than that."

If he hadn't been standing in this museum of antiquities, seeing him on the street he would've thought Jerry was a regular businessman who sat in an office eight hours a day. His appearance was very staid, just khakis and a polo shirt, a five-o'clock shadow creeping back in the evening and a recently-trimmed close haircut. When he opened his mouth, though, he emanated old prospector. He waved his hand at Martin, "Oh, most of those are from somewhere else. Missouri, Arkansas, down in Mississippi. I've been doing this a long time." He picked up a coin between two fingers and dropped it into Martin's hand. "This here is a 'Shield Nickel,' that came out after the Civil War. This was the first five cent piece they minted with the copper and nickel, like they do today. They're around, not rare. But pulling one of these out of the ground makes for a special day. Found this one just outside Savannah."

Martin handed him the nickel back and he replaced it in the tray. "Question on the metal detectors," he changed the subject. "How deep can they search?"

Jerry replaced the tray in the display case he'd pulled it from, one of a half-dozen lining his small shop. He turned back to the wall featuring the equipment. "Most of these, you're looking at twelve to eighteen inches. The one on the right there is pretty powerful. Can get you down three feet. Obviously, that one's more expensive. Some of the more specialized, professional models can go deeper, but I don't sell those. If you're just starting out, though, you can get what you need from these."

He had no idea how deep he'd need to search, and even had foolishly entertained the notion that he might be able to just drag the device along the Boardwalk, which in his mind would somehow look less conspicuous than climbing underneath – something he was already trying to

figure out how to pull off without involving the boro staff. “How much is the three foot one?” he asked.

“That one is six-ninety-nine,” he said without blinking. “But there’s a promo from the manufacturer with that one. Comes with some other things – gloves and a trowel. The trowel is kind of garbage, but the gloves are actually kinda nice. Save you about a hundred bucks in additional cost.”

Martin had been thinking about a buck-fifty, so he tried to hide his sticker shock. “Go big or go home, right?”

“Depends on where you’re looking. Where are you headed?”

“Thought I’d try the beach a little, just to get a feel for it.”

Jerry nodded. “People were finding a lot on the beach after Sandy, but it’s mostly picked over. You could find something, though. People lose watches, rings and what-not. I never understood people taking jewelry with you to the beach, but most people don’t see things the same way I do.”

Something occurred to him that he thought to ask, also giving him some time to see if he was really going to pull the trigger and spend money on this. “What about before Hurricane Sandy? How was the beach for detecting then? Was that a spot for you?”

He shrugged. “It was hit or miss. Same as today, I would think. You’d find some things, but you weren’t going to get rich on it. Maybe sometimes you had a lucky day and stumbled on an expensive watch that someone dropped or something, but it wasn’t likely to be a treasure trove. Detecting really started to take off in the early seventies, and the Baby Boomers all had to have one. They worked over the beaches pretty well during that time, so anything from before that was picked over.”

“Interesting,” Martin said. Another aspect of this he’d been trying to figure out was how and why Blythe’s pit was filled with valuables. He knew his history, and there was a timeframe that made sense. Seaside Heights started to become a destination right before World War I, becoming more popular and growing through the ‘20s and ‘30s. So, whoever had collected the treasure had done so after that. If it was through metal detecting, which was possible, but

unlikely, based on Jerry's perspective, that wouldn't have happened until the '70s, but would make sense that a colleague of Blythe's who had recently passed away might know about it. He had no reason to suggest that Blythe was involved in foul play. He also had *every* reason to suggest it.

"Okay," he said. "I'll take the powerful one."

"You sure? First-timer, you'll probably be fine with one of the other ones. See if you like it first before shelling out the money."

Martin laughed. "You talking me out of buying the expensive one?"

Jerry put his hands up. "I don't make a lot of money on these. I'm here to encourage people to get involved in detecting. I just don't want you to have to come back to return it if you decide it's not for you."

"That's very kind of you. What if I promise you I won't?"

He smiled. "It's your money."

They made the transaction, and Martin headed home with an expensive piece of equipment that he didn't know if he could legally or practically use wedged between his two front seats, in search of lost gold and a hook for his upcoming election.



## CHAPTER 7

Peter had turned in his flashy, rented Camaro, opting for a much more non-descript Nissan Murano, and stayed a good distance behind the mayor as he drove back toward the shore. He hadn't been sure what Ebel's next move would be, but his response to the story that Peter had woven together could not have been better.

The mayor had spent the last almost two hours in a metal detecting shop in Jackson, about forty minutes away, eventually walking out with a purchase – a full set: detector, gloves, headphones, trowel. He was clearly on-board, and it appeared to Peter that Ebel would be doing some research of his own in the coming days. He was excited like he hadn't been in years. Decades. He could feel his adrenaline flowing, because it had been a long time since a gambit had worked for him, and he'd played lots of them. This one, the mayor was falling for it, hook, line and sinker.

As he drove along the windy, tree-lined roads back toward Seaside, with the sunset fading in his rearview mirror, he tried to remember what he'd expected would happen. There were many questions, and multiple directions that Ebel could have gone to try to confirm everything Peter had told him. He'd figured he'd rope in some other people. Maybe get the boro attorney's take on it, since there would be lots of questions as to who the items in the cache ultimately belonged to. Maybe Public Works, or even someone in the state, because there could be some discrepancy over jurisdiction. But no. He was

going right for it, himself. Which was kind of thrilling for Peter.

Strong memories came back for him as he drove. There was more on these roads today, but they were largely the same as they'd been back in the '70s when he'd driven them with his family. The Great Adventure theme park, now under the Six Flags standard, had opened when he was in middle school, and had featured the world's first looping roller coaster. It had been very exciting for a kid of the right age to have that so close. He also followed Ebel through Lakehurst, where he remembered playing soccer on the fields right near where the Hindenburg had caught fire – a story he still told today any time Germany came up casually in a conversation. Those things had been a lifetime ago, but driving through these towns made them feel like they were yesterday.

He wasn't embellishing when he told Scott that he needed this. He knew he lived too much in the past, but chalked it up to not accomplishing everything he wanted to do in the present and, even scarier, not having any future. He was in decent health – Peter had started taking care of himself with exercise and good eating habits long ago – so he wasn't concerned about time. He felt like he had time. What he didn't feel he had was a plan. At his age, the idea of being in the same exact place in his life in ten years was terrifying. But, even with that sentiment, he hadn't been able to wrap his head around a normal thinking person's plan. All he had going for him, in his own eyes, was this shot in the dark. Without this, Peter knew he'd be out there somewhere chasing some bullshit sales opportunity, pissing away the years he had left.

Instead, here he was now, tailing the mayor of the small town where he spent so much of his youth, over the bridge leading to Seaside and surprisingly right past Ebel's neighborhood and toward the Boardwalk. He pulled to the side a half-block away as Ebel found a parking spot and got out of his car, heading up the ramp from the street.

*What's going through his head?* Peter watched as he exited his own car and followed. He watched Ebel turn left onto the Boardwalk under the flashing lights of the restaurants, bars and arcades, the dark nothingness of the

Atlantic Ocean past him. With the mayor temporarily out of sight, he double-timed it up to the Boardwalk and peered around the corner of an ice cream stand to try to catch him. He did, just in time, and saw him dip into one of the storefronts, pulling open a glass door and disappearing.

This was unexpected and interesting, and Peter couldn't turn away. While it was certainly possible that the mayor's side excursion had nothing to do with their ongoing conversation, he would be willing to wager that it did. And because of that chance, he had to follow.

Casually, he made his way along the row of shops and restaurants, prepared to duck into one of the storefronts in case that glass door opened again. By the time he reached it, a candy store, Ebel was still inside, so he slid past, peeking in. The mayor was standing at the glass display case, alone. Appeared to be waiting for someone. Peter kept walking and at the last minute saw two women, one in her late thirties, one a teenager, both redheads, come out from a door in the back of the place. Looked like a mother and daughter. But before he could get a good look at them, he was past their window, and didn't want to linger.

Was it related? Probably not, but he had nowhere else to be, so he pulled aside into the arcade adjoining, and grabbed a spot at a claw machine facing the candy store's direction, so he could see through the glass box without being obvious. He stuffed a five-dollar bill into the machine and strived for the appearance of a random grandfather trying to win a stuffed animal for his grandchild.

He used to be very good at these machines and throughout high school was adept at winning stuffed animals and other prizes to give to girls he had at least mild interest in, so he wasn't surprised when on his first attempt the claw successfully latched itself onto a Miss Piggy from *The Muppets* and pulled it toward the opening. It dropped just as he noticed the candy store door open, and Ebel and the older of the two women emerge onto the Boardwalk.

Reaching down, he pulled his prize from behind the door and followed, leaving four credits behind for some lucky kid.

\*\*\*

Martin knew he wasn't thinking clearly. He couldn't even say he was going on intuition. He just knew he couldn't keep this bottled up, and needed someone to blab to.

Problem was, he didn't really trust anyone, especially with the election coming up. People in Boro Hall had to toe the line of loyalty to their current boss versus the opposition, who could become their boss in just a few months, and Martin assumed that most would want to keep their jobs. So, he wasn't going to get much from them while he was still in exploratory phase. Neighbors, friends... Who knew what they'd do with the information? Maybe his sister in Florida, just to gab, but she was busy. Plus, she'd try to talk him out of whatever he was thinking, which he didn't want to hear at this point.

In the end, he decided if there was anyone, it was the one person with whom he'd developed somewhat of a social relationship. Perhaps, he could kill two birds with one stone and get closer to her by demonstrating trust. He'd worked it out on the drive back from Jackson, which had compelled him to head right for the Boardwalk, instead of home. There was a chance Connie wouldn't be at the shop at this hour, but he did know that some evenings she stayed because of short staffing. Just like a mall, there were rules for Boardwalk shops as to the hours they needed to keep, and especially late in the summer when they all lost some of their workers going back to college, she had to do what she had to do.

He thought his plan was a good one: he had enough outs that he could save face if she thought he was crazy. He'd tell her what he'd learned and get her feedback. If she was interested, he'd lead her to the next step. If she balked, then he could always fall back on the percentage of him that wasn't all bought in on the idea. The part of

him that hadn't just put almost a thousand dollars in metal detecting equipment on his credit card.

Martin pulled open the glass door to the candy shop and walked in, the smell of chocolate once again hitting his nose. He was starting to equate the aroma with the feelings he got being around Connie, which he didn't think was a bad thing. Unless, of course, they ultimately got together and had a breakup, at which point he knew he wouldn't want to smell chocolate ever again. A high school girlfriend had worked at Arthur Treacher's Fish and Chips, and the break-up was bad enough that the restaurant closed before Martin could bring himself to go back in.

Connie's daughter, Laura, was behind the counter organizing rows of truffles while a young Asian couple with a child five or six years old took turns picking out flavors of twenty-five cent candy sticks. Laura looked up to see him and smiled. "Hello, Mayor Ebel."

"Hi, Laura. Any chance your mom is around?"

"She is. She's in the back making turtles. Want me to get her for you?"

"If you would, please."

She disappeared into the back, leaving Martin alone with the young family. He watched them enjoying themselves as they talked each other into and out of the various flavors: butter rum, tutti-frutti and mandarin orange, eventually grabbing a handful and approaching the counter looking for a clerk.

Martin smiled at them awkwardly, knowing he'd just sent their customer service person away, but fortunately Laura reappeared after a moment, with Connie in tow. Martin mouthed thank you at her as she approached the customers and engaged them. Connie slipped around the counter and approached him.

"What's up?" she said.

He couldn't decide if it was casual or curt, for interrupting her, so he played the latter. "Do you have a couple minutes? I wanted to chat with you about something."

She looked back toward the kitchen, making him feel like this had been a bad idea, but then shrugged and

nodded. "Sure, I'm good. I was just kind of wrapping up anyway."

"I appreciate it. Go for a walk?"

The look of surprise crossed her face, but left quickly. *What kind of talk was he wanting to have with her?* Unfortunately, he had no quick answer, because the reality was as invasive as whatever she could've imagined he was going to say.

She pulled off her chocolate-covered apron and tossed it behind the counter, then motioned him toward the front door. They walked out together and started across the Boardwalk toward the fence separating the boarded pathway from the dunes and the beach. While they walked, he started to angle southward, toward the area that Peter had showed him.

The weeknight evening Boardwalk was still pretty busy, with summer starting to come to a close, and people wanting to make the most of their final weeks before diving back into the business of the fall. Every demographic was present – families, couples, teenager and kids. All having a good time. Evenings on the weekends had been a little bit rowdy lately, and they'd increased police presence to keep things calmer, but the weeknights were still pretty low-key, and people could enjoy themselves.

"What's up?" she asked when they reached the fence and stood looking out at the ocean.

The reason he hadn't started talking already was because he wasn't sure how to. Now, he was on the spot, so he just dug in. "I have to tell you something that's going to sound insane, but I need you to hear me out." Her look was interested and suspicious at the same time, but she said nothing, so he continued. "I've been made aware of a giant cache of gold that's hidden underneath the Boardwalk."

"Gold?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

He pointed just to their right. "Right about here."

"Who told you this?"

He sighed. "A guy I recently met who grew up around here."

"A guy you recently met?"

He held up his hands. "I know it sounds really fishy. But everything he's told me so far checks out. Believe me, I've tried to stay as skeptical as possible."

"So, what are you thinking? And why are you telling me?"

"I'd like to know if it's true."

"And what's that got to do with me?"

He looked off toward the water, the surf rolling in. "I'm not sure. I've been fighting with this since yesterday, and felt like I needed someone to talk to. Given everything that's going on with the election, there's not many people I trust."

"And you trust me?"

Turning back to her, "I think we've developed a friendship. No?"

She wavered a little, perhaps not agreeing they were as close as he thought they were. "I suppose so, yes. What are you planning to do? Dig it up and find out?"

"I bought a metal detector."

"You're going to just climb down there under the Boardwalk and start scanning?"

He laughed. Yes, it sounded ridiculous. "I know."

"And then what? Say you find something. What happens then?"

"If... it's there," he paused, trying to predict her reaction. "If... it's there, I think it can have a significant impact on the election."

She chortled and turned away for a moment.

"What?"

"I did not expect you to say that."

"What did you expect me to say?"

She looked into his eyes, perhaps the most familiar look she'd ever given him. She was reading him. "So, it's not about the gold?"

"The gold?" He shook his head. "No. I wouldn't even begin to know what the legalities of that are. Who it belongs to. What happens to it when it's found. I would imagine the state would have something to say about it."

“It’s about the unveiling.” She was thinking, nodding in agreement with herself. “Okay, I see where you’re going with this.”

“You do?” That was surprising. He laughed. “Can you explain it to me?”

“Yes. That would be a big find. Good press. People would respond well to it.”

“You think?”

She nodded affirmatively now. “Yeah, I do. Did your mystery guy tell you how it got there?”

“He was vague on that. Didn’t seem to know. Thought maybe metal detecting, because it was big in the seventies. But the guy at the shop said-”

Now, she pointed at him enthusiastically, actually poking him in the chest with her finger. “You know what I bet it is?” She was excited. “Back in the late seventies, there was a pickpocket ring here in Seaside. They were stealing from people on the Boardwalk and beach. My father told me about it. Always had these telltale signs to watch out for at the store-”

Realization hit Martin, and he let out a frustrated sigh. “Oh, my goodness. How did I not see that?”

“You know it?”

“I definitely do. My step-father was a jeweler, and he told me at one point that he thinks he might’ve been the one to stop them. He was beating his chest about it at the dinner table one time.”

“Yeah. If I’m remembering correctly, my dad said they were around, it was all anyone talked about, and then they stopped. They were just gone.”

“But no one made any arrests. Now, I remember the story. Dammit.”

“How does that change your thinking?”

He sighed again. “I’m not sure.”

They stood looking out at the water together. He could feel her energy beside him. In the space of a few minutes, had they gone from awkward acquaintances to collaborators. Plus, she’d felt comfortable enough to touch him.



After a few moments of contemplative silence, she spoke, “So, how are you going to get down there and check? You said you bought a metal detector?”

“I’m not sure. Probably just have to pick a time and do it.”

“Can I be here?”

He laughed. “You may be my lookout.”

She looked out toward the ocean again. “Look, Martin, I don’t like Miranda at all. I’d like to see you win the election. I don’t know that I’d be able to recommend you getting mixed up in something controversial, especially on the word of some random informant, who’s probably a criminal, but if there’s a chance this can help...” She chose her words carefully. “Let me know what I can do.”

His heart leapt. He had no idea what to do with that offer, but he liked it.

## CHAPTER 8

Tim Turner's desk phone buzzed, pulling him away from the last few paragraphs of the proposal he was reviewing. As regional vice president of business development for New England for Otis Elevator, his team had plenty of pitches going on any given day. This was a big one, though – a new, 58-story mixed-use skyscraper going into downtown Boston that would become the city's second-tallest building. Otis, the powerful elevator titan he represented, had a line on the job. Which was fortunate, because in spite of his responsibility on the project, he'd been distracted.

He reached out and touched the call button. "Yes?"

"Damon is here to see you," Shauna Reece, his assistant, announced.

"Excellent, thank you. Can you send him in?"

His office door opened a second later, and Tim's attorney, Damon Shaw, of Hartford's Petersen, Michalski and Shaw, entered. About his age, though somehow in better shape, not that Tim felt he was in bad shape, with close-cut silver-gray hair and wearing a smart blue suit with no tie, his attorney carried a look of confusion and urgency on his face. Since Tim hadn't given him the full picture of what he'd called about, that was to be expected.

"What's going on?" Shaw said as Tim rose to greet him. They shook hands, and Tim motioned him to the sofa against the wall.

"Did Shauna offer you anything to drink?"

"She did, yes. What's up?"

He took a seat in the chair opposite him, leaning forward. “Did you find anything out?”

Shaw nodded. “I did. But I have no context. I can’t help you if I don’t know what’s going on.”

“Well, I didn’t want anything on the record, and I also wanted to give you the story in-person. It requires some explanation.”

“Are you in trouble?”

He shook his head. “No. Not yet, at least. But I want to make sure I don’t end up being so.”

Now, he laughed. “Since you’re on the clock, we can go back-and-forth with you being coy as long as you want, or you can tell me what’s going on.”

“I’m getting to it,” he held up a finger. Shaw was Tim’s personal attorney, who handled everything from him – his real estate transactions, incorporation of a small, online side business he’d started for his wife, wills, etc. He had nothing to do with Otis, despite Tim having asked him to come to his office in downtown Hartford to meet with him. This was about something very unrelated.

When he’d returned home from New Jersey and Randy’s funeral, he’d given a great deal of thought to Peter’s little adventure he’d proposed. He’d walked out on them, and he felt bad about it. Probably because a part of him realized that was it. The end. They likely would never see or speak to each other again. It was something he didn’t want. But at the same time, even remembering way back, he knew that when Peter set his mind to something, it was going to happen. It was a miracle that they’d been able to get him to call it quits after the jeweler had outed them that day over the engagement ring, so long ago, and it was only the promise of going back at some point that had done the trick. Which meant that even if he did stick to his word and kept his and Scott’s names out of everything – which he believed he would at least try to do – there was still a significant chance that they’d find themselves in harm’s way. The more he thought about that, the more he knew he couldn’t let that happen.

But, first he had to educate himself. “What did you find out about statute of limitations?”

Shaw was still trying to piece together what he'd been asked to only inference. "The statute of limitations on a non-violent crime in the state of New Jersey is five years."

"Okay, so we're good there. I figured it couldn't just go on and on." It was the same thing Peter had said, but he didn't trust either his conniving friend or a random internet search.

"What, Tim?"

He let out a breath. "When I was a teenager, some friends and I got into some rabble-rousing. I'm not proud of it, obviously, but I've been able to put it behind me for more than forty years. It appears as though it's reared its ugly head again, though."

Shaw sat forward, matching his posture. "Define rabble-rousing."

"We were pickpockets. We worked the Boardwalk on the Jersey Shore for a summer. Did very well, too. We were well-trained and efficient."

He waved his hand at him. "Kids," he fluffed off. "Kids do stuff. You don't have to carry that around forever."

"Well, we did more than 'stuff,'" he corrected him. "I'd wager that throughout that summer we probably stole tens of thousands of dollars' worth of gold jewelry, money clips, watches... Anything we could get."

He nodded, smiling, then shrugged. "So, you were good pickpockets. Can't do anything about that now. No one can. You can't be tried for a crime you committed as a juvey."

"So, here's where there's more to the story. We never cashed in the gold. Not much of it, at least. A little here and there."

"What'd you do with it?"

"We stashed it." He waited for a reaction, but got none, so he repeated. "We stashed it. Meaning, it's still right where we left it."

Now, his eyes widened. "As in, it's *still* stashed somewhere?" Tim nodded. "And you want to get it?"

"No," he said, standing abruptly and pacing. "I don't want anything to do with it. I want it to stay put and never talk about it again."

"So, what's the problem?"

He turned to face him. "A friend of mine... Or, he was a friend back in the day, wants to try to recover it. If he does, a lot of questions will be asked."

"Questions you don't want asked."

"Yes."

Shaw sat back again, thinking. Mulling over what he now knew about the situation. He talked under his breath. "Forty years ago. Stolen jewelry. Statute of limitations. When was this?"

"Summer of nineteen seventy-nine," he said, sitting back down.

"Where's it stashed?"

"We dug a cache on the beach. Under the boardwalk."

"Oh, that's easy then. Forty years of weather and tides and surf? Hurricane Sandy? No way it's still where you left it."

He'd thought of that and shrugged. "Who knows? I'd rather prepare for if he does find it, and then breathe easy if he doesn't."

"Okay, so let's play that out. What if he finds it? What are you worried about?"

He sighed and shook his head. "I'm not sure. I don't like unpredictability. We'd made a name for ourselves that summer. This pickpocketing ring that was terrorizing the tourists." Despite trying to forget it, he couldn't help but let a slight smile cross his lips. "We were good. We could do it ourselves, or we had these group schemes. Misdirections. Sleight-of-hand. We use to have this thing we'd do where act like a bunch of asshole teenagers, disrupting everything, chasing each other. And then one of us would use a target as a shield while the other grabbed something from them. It was so obnoxious, and because it was so obnoxious, they didn't realize anything had happened until hours later. It was very well planned out." He could tell Shaw was squirming. "Sorry. I haven't relived that in a long time."

"What stopped you? Why did you never go back to get it?"

"A scare," he said, staring past him, thinking. "The police, we think, send out a notice to all of the jewelry stores, pawn shops. Anywhere we could possibly sell the gold – and gold was at an all-time high at the time. One

jeweler that we'd used a few times showed us the flyer, then said if he ever saw us again, he was turning us in." He was talking slowly. "Sorry, I haven't thought about any of this in a while. My friend, Peter, the one who's got this started up again, he didn't care. He wanted to keep going. The rest of us were spooked and told him he'd have to do it without us. Summer ended, we went back to high school for senior year, and that was it. Peter mentioned it a few times, but after high school we all went our separate ways. Haven't talked about it since."

Shaw sat forward again. "So, say your friend is successful and finds the stuff. You can't be arrested for it, much less convicted. You're thinking it's just your reputation. Which makes sense. But how could they pin it to you anyway? You didn't get caught back then. There are no witnesses, right?"

"There was this photographer that used to roam the beach at the time, taking pictures. Skinny guy, dressed very seventies, I remember, with the bell bottoms and this flowy purple shirt. Long, floppy hair. He took pictures of everything. Everything. Every day. Don't know how he ate or supported himself. Where his home was at night. He was kind of a local celebrity. Everyone knew him."

"And you think he got photos of you and your boys?"

Tim laughed. "No, we *know* he got pictures of us. We were young and reckless. We posed for him. It was a game."

"Why didn't he turn you in, if he knew what you were up to?"

"You don't understand... This was the most carefree guy you've ever met in your life. He didn't care. Told us many times he didn't care. He just liked being out there taking pictures." He paused. "Now, it's coming back to me. He told us once he was out and he came across a couple having sex on the beach. They were part of his art, so he snapped the pics. They never knew. The pictures went into the collection somewhere. He didn't care. They were just pictures. The guy would tell these amazing stories, but like he didn't care." He laughed. "Just another day at the beach."

Shaw held up his hands. "Let's hammer this out. I hate to be charging you three-fifty an hour for you to tell me stories."

"Right."

"What do you need?"

"I need protection. Assume worst-case scenario. He digs. He finds the gold. Somebody figures out that I'm connected to it. How do I keep my family and my reputation safe?"

"Sounds like you need a PR guy, not necessarily a lawyer."

He started to respond, but something clicked with him. He pointed at Shaw. "Yes. You might be on to something."

"Yeah?"

Tim stood again and walked toward him, eventually setting his hand on his shoulder. He tapped it twice. "Yes, thank you. You're right. This isn't about the legal piece."

"Glad I could help?" It was a question, but Tim wasn't paying attention. "You need anything else?"

"No," he said, shaking his head. "I'm good." He turned quickly to him, extending his hand. "I've got to make a call. Thank you for coming down here. I really appreciate it."

The handshake provided leverage as Shaw stood, confused. "You sure?"

"I'm good, yes," he said while escorting him toward the door.

The door closed, and Tim was alone. He was already in motion back behind his desk, where he grabbed his cell phone and scrolled quickly through his contacts. He found the one he needed and hit send.

Three rings before someone answered. "Hello?"

"Scott, it's Tim. I've got an idea."

## CHAPTER 9

Angela, you got a second?”

Martin’s face was poking in her office door, the rest of his body wrapped around the doorway, still in the hall.

Angela Starkey looked up at him. “Sure, Mayor. What’s up?” Starkey was the boro’s commissioner of public works, and a reasonable ally. Reasonable, because she liked her job, was good at her job, and would likely stay there no matter who occupied the mayor’s office down the hall.

He pulled his whole body into the office and quietly shut the door behind him.

“Oh, this should be good,” she said, putting down whatever she’d been reading.

Starkey’s tenure with the borough of Seaside Heights had begun long before Martin had become mayor, though it had been under his administration that she’d reached the top job, having served as deputy for nearly ten years, and out in the field before that. She was five or six years away from retirement, and was well-liked enough that it was really up to her if she stayed that long. She was pretty, but super tough, with short, cropped brown but greying hair. She was thin, but carried herself almost like a school administrator – the one you got sent to when you got in trouble in the early grades. She took shit from no one, and Martin had seen her dress down many of her peers, even state officials, over time.

He sat in the chair across from her and took a breath. After he’d walked Connie back to her shop the night



before and headed home, his intended next step was to get under the Boardwalk with his metal detector and investigate further. Confirm that what Blythe had told him was true. Over a late bachelor dinner of two pan-fried hot dogs and a microwave tub of mac-and-cheese, he etched out his plan to sneak under the wooden planks under the cover of darkness the next night and find out for certain if he was going to be moving forward or not.

Until he hit a roadblock: he had no idea how to get under the Boardwalk – from both practical and legal perspectives.

After Hurricane Sandy had caused massive devastation to the Jersey Shore in 2012, the state had used recovery funding to build new dunes between the Boardwalk and the beach, with fences surrounding them and ramped walkways the only way across. Walking on the dunes was forbidden, and punishable by fine and even jail time. So, even with his title, getting under the Boardwalk from the beach closest to Blythe's indicated location was not going to happen. He needed another way.

That other way was with the help of the boro officials, which was somewhere he hadn't wanted to go without conducting his own investigation first. But after about two hours of pacing his living room and watching the clock tick past midnight, he knew he couldn't do it without them. Fortunately, his motives, while selfish, were pure. The value of the objects in the sand weren't important to him – only that they existed. He'd already begun to sketch out what the public relations piece surrounding finding the treasure would be and, in many ways, he didn't care about what happened to the items. Who would get to claim them, or what reward they could bring. It didn't matter. Sure, he'd make the case for at least a portion of it to benefit the boro somehow, but unearthing it was the key.

That line of thinking gave him comfort to widen the circle. If it was about the money, he'd have been forced to play his cards closer to his vest. But it wasn't, so first thing the next morning, he strode down the hall to his commissioner's office.

"I need your help with something," he started, leaning forward on the chair, the makings of a short conversation.

“If I needed to get under the Boardwalk for something, how could that be done?”

“Under the Boardwalk?” she repeated, studying him. “Why would you need to do that?”

He’d decided he wasn’t going to beat around the bush for this conversation. First, it didn’t make sense to. Second, Starkey wouldn’t go for it. “I’ve been approached by someone who’s claiming that there is a significant amount of gold jewelry buried in a specific location underneath the Boardwalk. It’s apparently been there for almost a half-century.”

“How’d it get there?”

Rather than speculate, based on his conversation with Connie, he stuck to Blythe’s story. “My contact wasn’t sure. He said that a person he was close to knew about it, and had recently passed away. He came to me because he thought the knowledge might be important to us. To the boro.”

She was curious, if not sold, now leaning forward on her desk, her arms crossed in front of her. “Who’s this guy?”

Martin nodded. “I’ve researched him. From the perspective of his professional life, everything he’s told me checks out. I’m trying to tackle the best way to investigate all of this before bringing him back into the conversation, but I will at the appropriate time.”

“And you want to get under the Boardwalk to do what? Dig up this jewelry?”

“Well, if it’s there, yes. But not yet. First, I just want to get under there with a metal detector and see what we can find. Do you think we can make that happen?”

She shrugged, unimpressed. “Yeah, we can get under there. We’d have to be able to, in case an animal went under and died and was smelling everything up.” She paused, taking him in for a moment. “You sure you want to do this, though? It’ll attract attention.”

He put his hands up. “At least for this initial part, I’d like to attract as little attention as possible. If there’s actually something down there, then it’ll be big news, and we’ll deal with it. Can we keep it quiet for now? Only essential people know?”

“You think we’d get the stuff? It’d belong to the boro?”

“Oh, I have no idea. But... If that’s a possibility, and there’s something that can be done with it, I imagine it’s probably best not to have the county and state folks snooping around until we can figure things out. Would you agree?”

She thought for a moment. “I would.”

“How soon do you think we can do this? Do we need permits or anything?”

“I’ll work everything out. I’m assuming you want to get right to it?”

“If we can.”

“Alright. We’ll set it up for this evening. We’ll cordon off an area, so you have some separation, at least. I’ll wrangle some floodlights to bring underneath with us, so you can see what you’re doing. Are you going to dig, too?”

“I hadn’t planned on it.”

“Well, you might as well, if you find it. We’ll already be down there.”

Martin’s heart skipped a beat. He hadn’t considered that, and it changed the nature of the conversation. There was more to it than just finding the jewelry. If it was down there, the dig, itself, would be worth having a crowd. He shook his head. “I’d rather do that during the day. It’ll be lighter.”

She laughed. “Not under there, it won’t. You won’t get any more light than those floods.” He started to answer, but she cut him off. “Oh, I get it. I get it.”

He could tell she did. “Thank you.”

“Plan for eight o’clock – we’ll try to get between the dinner and the drinking crowd. Then, if we find what we want, we can just leave everything set up for the dig.”

Martin nodded and stood, starting for the door, then turning back. “You’re being exceptionally congenial about this. It’s pretty off-the-wall.”

She shrugged. “It’s an adventure. Something interesting. Doesn’t hurt anything to investigate, right?”

He smiled, thinking. No, it didn’t.

Leaving Starkey’s office, he pulled his phone from his pocket and searched for Blythe’s number.

## CHAPTER 10

Peter hadn't been surprised when he'd gotten the call from Ebel that he needed him that evening. Once he'd seen the mayor take the step of getting himself a metal detector, he knew the seed was planted, and they were well on their way. He'd canceled the lack of plans he had for the evening, and made his way to the Boardwalk.

What had surprised him, though, was the production. He'd thought about how the mayor might do his due diligence, imagining the whole time that he'd find some way to sneak under the wooded Boardwalk and investigate himself. Keep the circle small. But no, he'd gone the other direction, involving others from municipal government with him. It wasn't so overblown that people walking by would have any idea what was happening, but with the sun still up for a little while longer, definitely not a covert operation.

As he walked up to the site, he saw they'd cordoned off a section of the Boardwalk with cones and yellow tape, and were lowering two floodlights to the sand below. About a half-dozen town workers were involved, and peering over their shoulders was Ebel. He'd turned it into a full operation.

That, in itself, required some psychoanalysis. What was going through the mayor's mind? To Peter, it appeared as though he'd not only taken the bait, but was thinking about it in exactly the way that he wanted him to – it wasn't about the jewelry, or the cash value, but about the news story. Something to help his suffering campaign. That's

why there was no need for him to hide what he was doing. If other people know about it, it wasn't a problem. The question was how much research he'd done, and would he know the legalities surrounding the unearthing of buried treasure?

Wanting to look casual as he approached, as if his entire existence wasn't resting on what was underneath that sand, Peter grabbed a lemonade from the closest stand, distracting himself with childhood memories. There was nothing like a Boardwalk lemonade, and he slowly sipped it through an oversized straw, walking toward the small throng of treasure hunters.

Ebel caught him about ten feet away. "Mr. Blythe, thanks for coming," he said. He was dressed in a loose button-down, blue shorts to his knees and sandals. He aptly wore a Seaside Heights ballcap.

"Of course, I'd be here. I'm excited." He looked around at the activity. "I see you've gone the official route."

"Why wouldn't I?"

He shook his head and smiled. "No reason." If there was any guilt to be had here, the mayor wasn't having it. "Are you planning to dig this evening?"

"No," he said, watching the workers settle the heavy lamp apparatus onto the sand. "We'll come back and do that. Tonight is just to check and see if you're right."

Peter looked around. "Where's your metal detector?"

He motioned with his head. "It's already down there, covered. We figured while people might be wondering what we're doing here, that would probably give something away."

People were, indeed, stopping and looking, Peter noticed. But other than the giant lights that were clearly going under the Boardwalk, there wasn't much to see, and most of them were moving on to wherever they'd been headed. "Probably right," he muttered.

"Oh, let me introduce you to our commissioner of public works," Ebel said, abruptly walking past him to a woman standing several feet away. He returned a moment later with her in tow. "Peter Blythe, this is Angela Starkey. She heads up public works for the boro."

They shook hands as Peter sized up the introduction. Ebel was introducing her as if Peter was someone of great importance, trying to impress her. It was an interesting dynamic, and wreaked of need. This was important to the mayor and he was justifying it to her. Certainly, his prospects in the upcoming election played into that, and he immediately understood that Starkey was a bureaucrat who wasn't going anywhere, regardless of who won the race in November. It was a strange power dynamic, where it appeared the boss wasn't the one with the authority, but Peter had made a career of studying such dynamics and using them to his advantage in sales.

He shook Starkey's hand firmly, smiling at her. "Thanks for taking this on. I know it's a bit of a long shot, but I believe we'll find what we're looking for."

She pointed to her team. "It seems to have gotten them excited. It'll be interesting. The mayor said you knew the people who put the jewelry here?"

Was she probing, or making small talk? "I knew someone who knew them."

"And no idea how it got there?"

Ebel had clearly relayed his story to her. He shook his head. "He never said."

Starkey huffed indignantly, then excused herself and returned to supervising the second of the flood lights being lowered.

"She seems great," Peter said, trying not to come across as tongue-in-cheek. "Is she your appointment?" Ebel glared at him. That was a test question. He passed. "Sorry. But you have to imagine that if this little venture is successful, it'll be good for your re-election." Just put it right on the table.

"One can only hope."

Together, they peered over the railing at the sand below as the public works team got everything in place, sliding the flood lights under the Boardwalk in tandem. A few moments later, they started up the generator and the bright bulbs illuminated, visible through the slats.

Starkey approached again. "They're ready for you, Mayor. You can climb down over there." She pointed at a spot twenty paces away that Peter hadn't seen, where

they'd set up a ladder down to the sand near the opening they'd slid the flood lights into.

Ebel took two steps away, then stopped and turned to Peter. "You coming?"

"You want me to come down with you?" Of course he did, but he reacted with astonishment, then shrugged, following.

Starkey descended the ladder, then the mayor. Peter hesitated at the top, then followed slowly while Ebel kept it steady, his knees creaking step-by-step until his shoes sunk into the soft sand. The smell of surf and beach hit him, causing memories to flood back to him. Immediately, he could see the well-lit area underneath the Boardwalk, offering a different perspective than he'd ever had before, remembering back to silently crawling through the dark. Twelve feet in, eight feet over. It would be an interesting exercise trying to find the location in the light.

Starkey was at the opening, pointing inside and talking to one of the young men from her team. "... after we're done here, get over there and grab that garbage. Somebody has to be doing that on purpose. You don't have to go all the way back. There are bags in the maintenance room at the restrooms." The young man nodded and headed back toward the ladder, climbing up and disappearing. She turned to them, motioning to underneath the Boardwalk. "It's all yours."

Ebel passed the opening and lifted a tarp off his equipment, exposing the detector and headphones. He slipped the headphones over his ears and picked up the machine, then looked up at Peter wide-eyed. Clearly, he'd never used it before. Unfortunately, Peter had never metal detected either, so they were rookies going in. At that moment, he realized that it was quite possible they would hover directly over the stash and never know it's there because they didn't know how to use the equipment.

"Where are we headed?" the mayor asked.

Peter pointed in the general direction, but was interrupted by a commotion above on the Boardwalk. They were out of sight, but peered up to see what might be happening.

A moment later, one of the other men that had been lowering the flood lights down appeared over the railing. They all looked up at him.

“Drew, what’s up?” Ebel asked, standing, pulling off the headphones and holding the metal detector like a machine gun.

The young man sighed, then looked in both directions. “Miranda Sanderson-Cox is up here. She just showed up. Demanded to know what’s going on.”

“Demanded?” Ebel asked sarcastically. “I don’t know that she’s in a position-”

Starkey stopped him. “I’ll see what she wants.”

“Don’t tell her what’s going on here,” the mayor emphasized. “This isn’t public knowledge yet.”

She looked back at him, thought for a moment, then nodded and headed for the ladder. She disappeared over the top and her footsteps could be heard walking away from them on the boards.

Ebel motioned with his head. “C’mon.”

“Don’t you want to see-”

He shook his head. “I don’t care why she’s here. This is boro business.”

Peter knew the name, of course. She was Ebel’s opponent in the upcoming election. Clearly, there was bad blood between them, but the mayor wasn’t going to let this woman ruin his big day. Ducking down, he followed Ebel underneath the Boardwalk and into the glare of the floodlights, which were actually too bright. He envisioned a headache coming, if he stayed under their shine for too long. Crouched, Ebel moved to the side and motioned for him to take the lead, which he did. Already, his lower back felt the strain of being hunched over, which almost made him laugh about his pipe dream of recovering the cache of jewelry himself, after he and his boys had reached a certain age.

Unfortunately, the location wasn’t close. Where they were able to get underneath left them about a half football field’s length from the site. After about sixty seconds, Ebel stopped, though. “Hold on,” he said, pulling his phone from his pocket. He dialed, then waited for a moment. “Hi? Connie? It’s Martin.” Pause. “Thank you. You said



you'd be able to help me if I needed it? Can you go over and find out what's going on with Miranda?" Pause. "Yes, I'm under the Boardwalk right now." Pause. "Yes, underneath. I've got my metal detector, and I'm here with Peter Blythe." Pause. "He's the guy-" Pause. "Yes, the guy. But Miranda showed up and is causing a stir. Angela Stuckey went to-" Pause. "Okay. Thank you. Distract her, but if you can find out what she wants, that would be helpful, too." Pause. "Appreciate it." He stuffed the phone into his pocket.

"Calling in some back-up?" Must've been the redhead he'd been talking to the night before at the candy shoppe.

He shook his head, annoyed at whatever was happening above them. "Miranda could be Angela's boss next year. She's not going to do anything to piss her off. I needed someone I trust." He pointed ahead. "Almost there?"

Peter groaned. "I wish. You're going to have to get a gurney down here to get me back out."

He turned and steamed ahead, completely disoriented by being underneath the boards in the light. Above, he could hear footsteps, conversation and the regular noises of the Boardwalk, though muffled. As he looked for a landmark, the right support stanchion that used to mark their entrance, he remembered many nights hiding under there, quietly listening to the crowd above while waiting for his comrades to arrive from their busy night of looting. Scott. Double T. And Randy. He missed Randy.

He knew Ebel couldn't see his face from behind, so he closed his eyes as he inched forward, taking it all in. The sounds from above, and the surf to his left, beyond the newly-constructed dunes. The smell of the sand and the ocean, mixing the aromas of sausage and thin crust pizza above him. If he could have, he would've just sat there for hours, remembering what it was like to be a kid again, full of energy and dreams.

When he opened his eyes again, he saw it – a single trunk holding up a section in the middle of the Boardwalk, having survived all this time. There were many like it the length of the beach, but he knew immediately it was the one. He could feel his shoulder blades wrapping

around it, a memory of many times leaning back against it, whispering escape plans to the boys. They hadn't notched it, or put any kind of markings to remind themselves – perhaps they would've if they hadn't been scared away. But he knew. Looking to the left to see their position on the beach, though the scenery was slightly different courtesy of Hurricane Sandy, he confirmed it.

Ebel knew it, too. "This is right about where we were standing the other day when you showed me," he said.

Peter turned to him, nodding, then sat on the cool sand, the strain in his back easing immediately. Ebel, younger, crouched, something Peter wasn't going to subject his knees to. "It's right around here, from what I've been told." His heart was pounding, because he knew the exact spot, pending any shifts from forty years of weather, and it was just feet away. Since his story for the mayor was of the "friend of a friend" variety, he couldn't be so precise. He'd need to let Ebel play for a bit.

Just as ready as he was, the mayor donned his headset and went to work. Peter, not being able to hear what was in his ears, watched his facial expressions as the mayor tried to navigate the lack of headroom with the six-foot long detector.

He started about ten feet away from what should have been the right spot, moving away from it, toward the ocean. Peter let him go, watching for any pauses. There had to be other things under there than just their stash – some ninety years of people dropping jewelry and coins through the slats from above. Knowing Ebel had never used the equipment before, he was curious the reaction he'd have once he found something.

After a few minutes, Ebel stopped and pulled off the headphones. "You said there's a bunch of stuff, right?"

"That's what I was told. Why? Have you heard something?"

He nodded. "A few blips, yes. But nothing to make me think there's a treasure under here."

Peter looked up. "I'm trying to place where we were standing up above. Why don't you try over there?" He pointed close to ground zero.

Ebel wasn't attached to any one place, so he slid over to where Peter had suggested. He slipped the headgear back on and went to work. For a few moments, he teased hovering over the right spot, but pulled away at the last second, systematically checking as though he was vacuuming a carpet.

Finally, though, he approached the section of the beach where Peter and his team had put so much work into concealing their prizes, and he braced for the reveal.

It didn't come. Ebel marched right over it without a hesitation, continuing several feet northward before circling back.

Peter's heart sank.

Was it lost? Had forty years of high tides and Atlantic storms buried it for good? Had everything, including decades of waiting, been for naught?

"Oh, hold on," Ebel called, causing him to look up.

"You found something?" he asked, though the mayor couldn't hear him.

"Oh, man," he continued, his own voice starting to tremble. He slipped off the headset and held it out to Peter. "Come here, you've got to hear this."

Peter didn't bother trying to stand this time, instead just turning and crawling over to him in the sand. He took the headphones and put them over his ears. Ebel ran the sensor over the area, about four feet from where he'd thought was the right place, and a cacophony of tones riddled his ears. The machine went ballistic, and the two of them made eye contact. Peter tried to read what was going through the mayor's head, but they certainly were sharing a moment of mutual excitement.

He handed the headset back to Ebel. "That's fantastic. I told you."

"It's unbelievable." The mayor didn't know what to do with himself.

"So, what's next?"

"Well, I suppose we schedule the dig. Have a big press conference."

"Just like that?"

His eyes were on fire. "No sense in waiting." He pointed at him. "You're not leaving town, are you? I want you here. Are you available tomorrow?"

“Tomorrow?” It shouldn’t have caught him off-guard, but it did. He recovered. “I’m here, yes. I’m not going anywhere. Wouldn’t miss this.”

Ebel was now pacing, still hunched over somehow. After a moment, he pulled a red bandana from his pocket and stuffed it into the sand with two fingers, leaving most of it in view. “It’s not supposed to rain today or tomorrow. This will mark the spot. Let’s go.”

He headed for the opening, where Starkey was hovering and waiting, and Peter followed. They reached the open air to find that dusk had set in, and Drew, the man who’d flagged them about Ebel’s opponent being present, passed them to turn off the floodlights.

Starkey was looking at Ebel’s face. “You found something.”

“Oh, we found something. I want to do it tomorrow.” She nodded. “What’s Miranda up to?”

“She’s up there. I’m sure she’ll have some words for you.”

He reached over and patted Peter on the back. “Ain’t nothing gonna bring me down this evening. Let’s have at her.”

To his left, the floodlights switched off, leaving the underside of the Boardwalk in pitch black darkness. Peter watched as Ebel set his metal detector on the sand and ascended the ladder, then braced himself to follow him up.

\*\*\*

Martin reached the top of the ladder and immediately made eye contact with Connie, who was standing under the lights of the Boardwalk businesses, the remnants of sunset in the sky behind her to the west. Next to her was his opponent in the upcoming election, Miranda Sanderson-Cox, predicably poised with her arms crossed, annoyed, waiting for a confrontation.

On his way up the ladder, Martin had determined he wasn’t going to give it to her. Or, at least, he’d do his best. What he was working on was not for public consumption yet – in fact, only a handful of those on the scene knew

what was actually happening. Being a regular citizen, at least for now, Miranda didn't have access to what he was working on. Given that fact, he tried not to wear a smug smile as he approached her.

She was a good candidate, which had kept her ahead in the polls throughout the summer. Well-spoken and very knowledgeable on the issues facing not only the boro, but its place in the state. She was tall, close to six feet, with long dark brown hair that she wore in front of her shoulders with a little curl at the bottom, directing your eyes – strategically, Martin always thought – to her breasts. She was a pretty lady, with green-yellow eyes, and a warm, inviting smile. In truth, before she'd decided to run against him, they'd gotten along fairly well. He even liked her, though he wasn't a fan of her husband, Brady Cox, who was an asshole lawyer that tended to inflict himself on the community more often than anyone wanted. Almost certainly, Brady's name would come up in this conversation.

“Good evening, Miranda,” he said cordially, intentionally leaving the yellow nothing-to-see-here tape in between them. He was the mayor. She wasn't.

She didn't return the cordiality. “What's going on here?”

“Nothing crazy,” he said. “Some boro business.”

“Some boro business where the mayor needs to climb under the Boardwalk?” Her hands were now on her hips in a confrontational pose.

He glanced to Connie, who simply shook her head. He read what she was saying – she'd tried to diffuse the situation. But Miranda wasn't to be stopped. Ever.

“It's not really anything to be concerned about, Miranda. There's no voters in the sand under there.”

She didn't like his dismissive tone, but she wasn't going to get anything different from him. For the first time in months, maybe even since they'd kicked off their campaigns, he had an ounce of leverage, and he was going to hang onto it.

“Well, I didn't expect you to be upfront with me. I'm having Brady draft a FOIL request tonight, and it will be in your mailbox and to the media in the morning.”

That made him smile. It was an aggressive threat, but not unpredictable. Miranda and her husband had filed a number of Freedom of Information Law requests so far that year, each of which were duly responded to by Martin's team by their 30-day deadline, all proving that the request had done nothing but waste boro employees' time. One was for information on a low-cost bid process for office furniture. Waste of time. One was to double-check state-imposed diversity hiring measures on a contracted sewer repair job. Again, waste of time.

As would this one be. Everyone knew they had thirty days to respond to a FOIL request, and since the borough of Seaside Heights would be unveiling what was in the sand within 24 hours, the Cox's legal action would mean nothing. She'd be embarrassed, but given this new knowledge, he also knew that she would then take credit for "forcing his hand."

"I'll watch for it," he said.

They had a standoff for a moment, and then she turned and stalked away. He watched until she was out of earshot, then turned to Connie. "Thanks for doing that."

"No problem. Though I don't know if I helped at all. She was pretty fired up."

"Yes, she gets that way."

"So?" He grinned as she inquired, "You found it?"

Nodding, "We found it." Which reminded him that he'd left Blythe behind, and he turned to find him standing several feet away. He waved him over. "Connie, this is Peter Blythe. Peter's the one who came to me. Who knew where the stuff was stashed?"

She looked him over. "Peter Blythe," she said slowly, then extended her hand, which he took. "I'm glad you showed up. You may just save the mayor's campaign."

Blythe looked down meekly. "Well, that's not why I'm here. I'm just here to honor an old friend. If it works out, it works out."

"Right," she said. Martin noticed a wry smile.

"Connie owns the candy shop up on the Boardwalk up there," Martin said, pointing "Seashore Candy Shoppe. Taffy. Chocolate. Milkshakes. She inherited it from her father. It's been there... What? Forty years?"

“Closer to fifty at this point.”

“Fifty years. Wow.” He turned back to Blythe. “You probably went to her father’s shop when you were a kid.” Back to Connie. “Peter grew up here, but left after high school and hasn’t been back to visit since.”

“Lots of memories?”

“Oh, absolutely.”

“So, Connie had a theory the other day that you might be interested in,” Martin said. “Her father had told her back when she was a kid in the late seventies that there was a fairly successful pickpocket ring here at Seaside. You might actually remember it. It made the news. They were active, and then just disappeared one day. She’s suggesting that maybe the stuff stashed under the sand there was their stuff. Probably a long shot, but, hey, stranger things have happened.”

Blythe looked at Connie and nodded. “That’s an interesting theory. Could be. Like I said, my friend didn’t tell me how it got there. Just that it’s there.”

“It was probably easier to get underneath there back then.” Martin pointed to the dunes. “Before all this landscaping. We’ll know more tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” Connie asked, surprised.

“Oh yeah. We’re not waiting on this. We’re digging that stuff up right away.”

“So, Miranda’s legal request.”

Martin laughed. “It’s a joke. We’ll fulfill it long after we’re done here.”

“Media?”

“Definitely.” He looked to Blythe, who might’ve appeared uncomfortable. Perhaps tossing out about the pickpockets had resounded. Not wanting him to pick up on the fact that he’d made a connect, though, Martin reached out and grabbed his arms, squeezing him. “C’mon. Be excited. You’re near the end of a long journey.”

Blythe snapped out of it and smiled. “Trust me. I’m excited.”

Martin lifted up the yellow tape for Blythe to escape. “I’ll text you the details. I’m thinking early afternoon.”

The man nodded and walked away, leaving him alone with Connie. He turned back to her and started to explain

that he needed to get back to work when she interrupted him.

“I know that name.”

“What name? Peter’s? How?”

She shook her head. “I’m not sure. I’ve just heard it before.”

Martin wanted to dig in, but he didn’t have time to. Plus, he was too excited. If Blythe was indeed connected to the crime ring, then using him was a necessary evil. “Can we pick up on that later? If we’re going to pull off a press conference tomorrow afternoon, I have to-”

“Oh, definitely. Get going. Let me know if you need me to hurry over and accomplish nothing again tomorrow.”

He laughed. “I’ll be sure to.”

“Good luck,” she said, turning away and heading back to the candy shop.

A to-do list of a million things flooded Martin’s head, and he turned to find his public works commissioner to set things in motion.



## CHAPTER 11

Seventeen-year-old Peter Blythe stood on the beach at what he assumed was low tide, the crests of tiny waves washing over his feet and sinking his heels further into the sand with each passing. He was facing the Boardwalk, over the bustle of beach activity between where he was standing and the place where thousands of dollars of stolen gold jewelry was buried in the sand. A beachball flew right to left in his field of vision, but he ignored it. To his right, a family arrived for the day, and while the parents flopped the array of beach gear they carried to the ground, a pair of elementary school siblings, a boy and a girl, fled from helping set up to get their first taste of the water. The hot July sun beat down from overhead.

Done with high school and, unlike his college-bound friends, having no specific plans for where he was headed, this was now the eleventh straight day that he'd stood in that exact spot, staring listlessly away from the ocean behind him. Hours upon hours, planning and negotiating in his own mind what he was capable of. He was surprised no one had called the police and reported him for loitering. He knew he had to look out of place – most people came to the beach and faced the water. Not Peter. *His* escape was a hundred paces away, covered only with sand and a tarp.

Of course, he knew he could recover the gold that they'd stolen from dozens of tourists the summer before. It would be easy. Not only had he chosen the location, but he'd developed the plan on how to access it without attracting the watchful eyes of the Seaside Heights Police

Department. While he might not have tried it a year earlier, with the alert out about their nefarious work on top of the Boardwalk, there was not a fraction of the security in the summer of 1980. No problems meant their guard was down. He could easily sneak in and get it back.

So, why wasn't he? Why did he come here and pine over what was possible, surrounded by families and sunbathers and Bennies, while his partners-in-crime were off doing more important things with their lives?

He knew the answer, and he couldn't believe that it was the answer that his psyche had come up with.

It was them. Scott, Double T and Randy. They were the reason.

It was logical, if not intelligent. They'd done everything together. Every piece of jewelry in that pit had been the product of a master plan implemented by all four of them. Yes, Peter had designed it, but the stash wouldn't exist without them. After that damned jeweler had scared them out of participating anymore, the three of them had determined that they'd let it go. They'd leave the stuff there and, since each of them were headed onto bigger and better things, the risk of going back in was far too great. None of them would jeopardize college and a successful career to recoup the fruits of their efforts. Peter couldn't argue with them, even though his own sense of promise wasn't quite as hopeful.

He knew he'd be fine, even if he wouldn't be settling into a long career in an office with a retirement party waiting for him at the end of thirty, forty years. He'd proven himself to be a person who got things done, and he held utmost confidence in his persuasive abilities. Hell, he'd gotten three rambunctious, but docile, South Jersey teenagers to build a successful crime ring. He wasn't headed for college. Not because he couldn't do it, but it held no interest to him. They weren't going to teach him anything that his own experiences hadn't already. So, he'd muddle through and make a life for himself.

That gold sitting across the beach there would make things so much easier.

But he couldn't bring himself to do it without them. He didn't care about the risk to himself. But he cared

about the risk to them. His friends. They'd backed him when he'd come to them, and now he needed to back them. There was too much at stake.

The option of doing it himself was off the table, too. It wasn't his stash. It was theirs. He'd contemplated keeping them in the dark and just doing it, but then disseminating it to them. But what would that do to them? They hadn't authorized that as a team. It was selfish, and would lead to disaster.

No, everything would stay right where it was. For now.

At some point in their lives, there would be a reason to go back. The four of them, together. Finishing what they started.

And he'd be ready and available. He'd make himself available.

\*\*\*

The latest wave receded from around his ankles as Peter read the text message again. His sandals sat a few feet away, out of the path of the water. He'd been standing there long enough that his feet were fully submerged in the sand, and the wet grains scraped in between his toes. Brought back plenty of memories.

The last time he'd been in that spot had been that day, more than forty years ago, when he'd made the final decision that he wasn't going to try. That he was going to leave the stash behind in hopes that they'd someday come back to him wanting to recapture it. The sun had just risen behind him as he thought about the mayor's press conference that was scheduled for that afternoon. He'd ceded control, which somehow justified moving forward. Whatever convictions he'd had standing in that spot so long ago were now removed. It wasn't him that was going into the sand. It was someone else.

Not only was it someone else, but it was someone who was inextricably tied to their story. Only, at this point, he didn't know it yet. Having Mayor Martin Ebel pull the gold out of the ground would be satisfying on a number of levels, which was something that he didn't think his comrades would appreciate like he would. They hadn't carried this around for forty years.

Peter hadn't just made the decision to abandon their treasure that day, back in the summer of 1980. He'd made the decision to abandon the area altogether. He knew that he couldn't stay. The temptation to betray his friends would be too great. He knew that he'd spend countless hours standing in that very spot being pulled. Being pressed. The gold would call to him, and its attraction would be insurmountable.

So, he'd left. Left abruptly, in fact, not telling anyone. He figured no one would mind, as they were just weeks away from entering into the next phase of their lives. His parents would ultimately be encouraging, even if they weren't happy at the impulsive escape, but they'd already been pushing him to get out on his own by then. He had money still. He had ambition, even if it wasn't directed at anything. Once he'd dissuaded himself from crawling back underneath the Boardwalk and took that first step in the sand, he didn't stop. Not until his car reached New Orleans, where he rented a \$21 a night room and started the rest of *his* life. He eventually called everyone and let them know, but until he pulled into town to send Randy off, he hadn't been back.

Satisfied with his circular reasoning surrounding who would actually be digging the gold from the ground, he read the text message he'd written again:

**EBEL'S GOING TO DIG UP THE CACHE. THIS AFTERNOON.  
WE'RE READY.**

He took a deep breath, sucking up the ionized sea air, and took one last look in the direction of the stash of gold jewelry that would be unearthed later in the afternoon.

Then, he hit send.

\*\*\*

Scott was seven minutes into his workout on the treadmill when he heard his phone buzz on the table in the dining room. He didn't like interrupting his exercise routine, but a text this early in the morning often meant some kind of emergency. Hoping for the best, he

detached the safety cord, silenced the runner, and stepped off.

He reached his phone after the illuminated notification had gone off, and clicked the screen on. It was a text from Peter to both him and Tim, which he read quickly. He took a moment to digest it, then set the phone back on the table and returned to his workout.

## CHAPTER 12

The only thing Martin could possibly think of that could screw things up was if they went into Blythe's pit, and there was nothing there. He thought of the scene at the end of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, when they chased down the Ark of the Covenant, went through trials and tribulations to secure, and then opened and found nothing. The German henchman laughing at their misfortune. To the mayor, that would be the equivalent of finding nothing in the sand that afternoon.

Notwithstanding that everything went haywire after that, but that didn't fit his analogy. He hoped.

But, Martin had an ace up his sleeve, as he'd already heard the metal detector go crazy when it crossed over the area that Blythe had indicated. There was definitely something down there, and there was no reason to suspect that it was anything but what Blythe had said it was.

Without the actual dig even happening yet, the day was already a success, and Martin could feel his deficit to Sanderson-Cox melting away, just from the positive vibes. Word had gotten out – perhaps prompted by some strategic calls he'd made – and a few hundred people had shown up. Media was there in full force – not a common occurrence for a small-town mayor's press conference. And, as he'd suspected, once the state got wind of the idea, they'd flocked there, as well. State Assemblywoman Monica Fisher had shown up – Martin had a good relationship with her, even though she was a Republican – as had representatives from Ocean County, the state

senate and the governor's office. The gold wasn't even out of the ground yet, and Martin could already envision the debate that was set to take place over whose it was. He allowed himself a slight smile over the hub-bub. It was good for him.

The energy in the crowd was wonderful, except for two people. One was his opponent, whose scowl appeared like a gray cloud in the middle of a rainbow. She was not happy with the way Martin had rolled things out, especially knowing her Freedom-of-Information gambit had failed big time. Did he feel guilty about having a bit of an incumbent's edge? Not in the least bit. In fact, he was quite enjoying her annoyance. It had been a long year for him.

The other person was a bit of a mystery, though. Martin had seen him moving through the crowd, darkly, reminiscent of a snake sliding through tall grass. He was the only one in the summer heat in a suit, a dark gray suit, with not even the tie loosened, though the temps were approaching 90. He had tight silver-gray hair, military cut, with dark sunglasses on. Martin wanted to think Secret Service agent, but they generally stayed in the background. This guy wanted to be seen, and was much creepier. Enough so that he was throwing him off a little as he tried to play the center-of-attention role.

They had everyone assembled on the Boardwalk, where they'd make some remarks before going below. It was worked out that Martin, Blythe and Starkey's team would descend the ladder as they'd done the evening before, and go underneath. At that point, everyone watching would make their way down the wooden ramp onto the beach outside the fenced-off dunes, so they could... kind of... see what was happening. The flood lights were bright enough, but the vantage point was not ideal, as the closest person in the crowd would be a good 100 feet from the dig site. No way around it. Then, though, they would emerge and meet up on the beach with Fisher and the rep from the governor's office, who Martin didn't know personally, both of whom had asked to offer some comments for the media.

He was going over the run-of-show in his head when he noticed Blythe approach. The mayor extended his

hand. "Good afternoon. I was worried I was going to have to try to find you somewhere in this crowd."

Blythe shook his hand. "Great showing. Didn't really keep it under wraps, did you?"

"Would you have if you were me?"

He smiled. "I'm not a politician, so I don't have an eye for these things. But I suppose not."

Martin checked his watch. "We're just waiting for the governor's office. They were sending someone. I haven't met them yet."

"I saw one woman shaking hands with people like a politician," Blythe searched the crowd, then pointed at Fisher. "There. I'm assuming she's somebody."

"That Assemblywoman Fisher. I invited her. She's a good ally."

"Lot of cooks here to stir the broth."

He nodded. "Yes. But I figured they'd find their way here anyway at some point once word got out. Might as well get in front of it. Use it to strengthen some relationships."

"Can't argue there."

He felt his phone buzz in his pocket and pulled it out. "Hold on, this could be the governor's office." It wasn't. It was Connie, who he thought would be somewhere in the crowd. He swiped across the screen and brought up the text:

**SORRY TO BUG YOU. I CALLED MY DAD AND TOLD HIM ABOUT TODAY. YOUR NEW FRIEND PETER BLYTHE CAME UP. HE KNEW THE NAME. WE NEED TO TALK ASAP.**

Instinctively, he hid the phone from Blythe, who was still standing next to him.

"No?" Blythe asked.

He shook his head and tucked the phone back into his pocket. "No. Someone else."

Before he could take a moment to think about Connie's cryptic message, though, a young woman approached him. She was dressed in a navy business suit and skirt, quick footsteps in flats rolling on the boards as



she walked. Long auburn hair straight down the middle of her back.

“Mayor Ebel?” she greeted, removing her dark sunglasses for a moment so they could make eye contact.

He nodded and smiled, shaking off the mystery he’d just been presented. “Yes. You’re from the governor’s office?”

“I am. Brenda Kopinski. Sorry I’m a few minutes late. One ninety-five was backed up. Accident.”

He shook his head. “No worries at all. We can get started, or if you need a minute to get settled, there’s a restroom right down there.”

“I’m good,” she said, poised. “The governor sends her thanks for the invitation, and her apologies that she couldn’t make the event herself.”

“Understood.”

They moved over to a central area they’d set apart, currently surrounded by television cameras, and behind them the eager crowd. Martin waved to Fisher, who had noticed them move into place, and she joined them.

People began to hush each other, seeing something was happening. Martin took center stage, with Fisher and Kopinski on either side of him. Blythe remained off-camera for now.

Looking out at the throng, Martin took a deep breath. This was the beginning of his comeback.

\*\*\*

Peter was calmer than he’d expected he’d be, having waited forty years to reach this point. Of course, to him, there was no mystery. He knew exactly what was underneath the sand. So, this wasn’t about a treasure hunt for him, like it was everyone else present. More a starting point for the rest of his life.

Nothing that he’d seen so far was unanticipated. Ebel had taken the bait and run with it. Wanting as big a splash as possible, the mayor had called everyone in the state and invited them, which was going to make for a bit of a pickle by the time it was all done, as everyone was going to want a piece of something that wasn’t theirs. He could envision

the legal battle that would ensue. But Ebel wasn't his responsibility. He was a big boy. He'd figure it out.

The crowd was now gathering around the three politicians, who were geared up to deliver their comments before the big unveiling, and to the left and right several cameras and reporters gathered in a makeshift media pit. Blythe and Ebel had worked it out where he would be mentioned, but not a formal part of the press conference. Which was good with him, as there was nothing to be accomplished by having him standing up there next to them. This was their moment, and he was just the guy who made it possible. He stood at ease, his hands clasped behind his back, rocking on the balls of his feet as everyone else pushed in to get a better view.

Across the way, he saw the only person he'd invited to the event. Well, besides Tim and Scott, who hadn't answered his text. He wasn't surprised. Though, he wished like anything they would have chosen to attend. This was as much a part of their lives as it was his.

No, the brooding, suited man on the other side of the throng, positioned to listen intently to the speeches, was there for a higher purpose. A man he'd known for almost as long as the gold had been buried in the beach. Peter smiled as the man meticulously avoided eye contact with him.

The din of the crowd began to wane as everyone took their places. Ebel had brought a formal podium and microphone/speaker set up, so everyone on the Boardwalk would hear the proceedings. Though the sun was bright overhead, he pulled off his sunglasses and leaned forward to the mic. "Thank you, everyone, for being here. We'll begin in about one minute."

That would get everyone to stop talking, and allow people to jostle for the best position to watch. No one was going to usurp his front-row seat, but he noticed a stern-looking brunette muscle her way to the front, directly across from the podium, at the last minute. Peter assumed by her aggression that the woman was Ebel's opponent, trying to inflict enough distraction on the event to minimize its political impact. He smiled slightly to himself.

He'd have given anything to have been able to tell her she had little to worry about. But now there was no time.

After a moment, Ebel returned to the podium and stood, politician style, straight backed and with his hands resting on either side of the podium. He took a moment to take in the crowd then, after a deep breath, began.

"Thank you all for being here. It's a great day here in Seaside Heights." A pause. "You don't wake up every day with a treasure hunt on your schedule, but that's exactly what's happened." Peter heard murmurs among the crowd. His understanding was there had been rumors abounding, but most people present didn't know exactly what was going on. Ebel had decided to get to the point quickly. "At some point in our boro's celebrated history, someone buried a significant amount of gold jewelry directly underneath where we're standing right now. The story of how it got there is still coming clear, but we have confirmation that it's there. Today, we're going to get a shovel in the ground and see what it's all about."

He let that sink in for a moment as the crowd continued to quietly respond. Peter had given plenty of speeches over time, and as a professional sales guy had always considered himself a student of communication. Ebel was doing a good job, especially at containing his enthusiasm. Having spent the last couple days around him, he was certain the mayor was jumping out of his skin, and would've liked nothing more than to walk across the Boardwalk and taunt his attractive but unreasonably off-putting opponent over his impending success.

"I'm very pleased to be joined here today by Brenda Kopinski, who's here representing Governor Devereaux, and Assemblywoman Fisher." Both waved and nodded to the crowd. "One of the questions you may ask is what will become of what we dig up. That's a question that still needs to be answered, which is why we have representatives from the state here with us today. We've made an agreement that before we got into any deliberation on what all of this means, we'd first confirm that there's actually something to talk about. Needless to say, this is a very exciting day for all of us, for the Boro of Seaside Heights, and for the great state of New Jersey. I'd like to give my colleagues a moment to say a few words."

Ebel stepped to the side as Fisher and the lady from the governor's office reiterated his points about how exciting this all was and what it meant for the area and blah, blah, blah. Peter took the time to watch the mayor's opponent, who he could tell was ready to explode. Ebel had to know it, too, so he was curious if he was going to open the floor for questions. Peter knew he wouldn't, if it was him. But he'd never been a politician, and had never been in the position to have to be cordial to a political rival.

Once the others were done, the mayor took the podium back. "One person we need to specifically point out and thank is Peter Blythe, a native son, grew up in Toms River, who returned home just recently, and brought us the news of this discovery. Peter's been a great resource for us, and has agreed to help us get to the bottom of this find."

He hadn't, actually, but it was alright that Ebel had said it. He would, actually, be helping them find plenty of answers, even sooner than the mayor might've expected.

"So, some logistics," the mayor continued, pointing to the nearby ramp down to the beach. "We're going to have everyone walk down this ramp – please let the media go first, and then follow – and we've set up an area on the beach there, cordoned off with ribbons. That's where we'll hold the second part of this press conference. Our public works team and Mister Blythe will use this ladder to get beneath the Boardwalk. We'll make the dig, and then join you out on the beach with a report." He paused. "We'll see you down there."

As he turned, a woman's voice called out, "Are you going to take any questions?"

Stopping his step forward, Peter didn't have to look to see who'd asked, but his head swiveled anyway to see Ebel's opponent, having literally taken stepped in front of the rest of the crowd to put herself front-and-center.

\*\*\*

Martin had wavered on whether he was going to be able to escape the Boardwalk part of the press conference

without any interference from Sanderson-Cox. He knew that she was strategizing just as he was, and that down below on the beach, once they'd pulled the gold out of the sand, she would get lost in the excitement. Up here was her only opportunity to make some noise, and she was taking advantage. While he'd hoped that he could escape without it, he was at least somewhat prepared for it.

He'd actually started to step away, but stopped, sliding back behind the podium. "Yes, certainly. Miranda?"

The question was what would she ask, and he was pleased to see a hint of hesitation on her face. She didn't know, but knew that she had to say something. That eased his mind that she didn't have any inside information she could use as a gotcha. She was typically extremely well-researched, especially with her attorney husband as a resource, but it looked as though Martin rushing things through had paid off. He simply hadn't left her enough time to dig in.

"Can I ask how you know that this... treasure... is below, and can you assure us this isn't some snipe hunt for publicity?"

Martin nodded. Weak question. She could've gone into ownership of the prize. She could've asked about Blythe's legitimacy. She could've even started talking about something completely different – one of her own campaign platforms. Transparency, perhaps. Instead, she'd blathered.

Today was going to be a good day.

\*\*\*

Peter's hopes for an interesting exchange fell quickly. The woman had nothing to say.

For a moment, he'd thought maybe she'd force her way in by requesting he take the microphone. He was prepared, if that was the case – he'd been going over his story for forty years, so he could handle being in front of people with it. It would've been a viable move for her, but she went a different direction. Which meant that she was as surprised about all this as anyone else present. Should be easy for the mayor to deflect.

Which he did. “With the help of our public works department, we investigated yesterday evening with a metal detector, and found significant activity in an area right about there.” He pointed to a section of the Boardwalk, causing the group standing over it for some reason to scatter. “This correlates with Mister Blythe’s report of the cache of jewelry. That gave us confidence to proceed today with an actual dig.”

“And what if there’s nothing there?” she continued. “What if this is a ruse?” She glanced at him.

Ebel laughed, also looking to Blythe. “Well, then we’ll all blush from embarrassment, and apologize to everyone for wasting their time today. Any other questions? Okay, let’s get to it!”

The mayor motioned to Peter to follow, then turned and walked toward the ladder. Peter’s wheels were turning, as he hadn’t expected his certainty – or honesty – to be invoked by Ebel’s opponent, and considered there might be an opportunity to conspire once his gold was pulled from the ground.

\*\*\*

Scott waited patiently in the middle of the master bedroom while Mrs. Yearney explored every square inch of the walk-in closet. Mr. Yearney, knowing the section of the house would be off-limits to him, poked his head in behind her.

He had them at about eighty percent that they were going to purchase this beautiful house in Brielle, just steps from the water and even closer to the golf course, and knew that some well-placed nudges would push them over the top. Unfortunately, his mind was far from that bedroom, knowing that at that exact moment, a hoard of treasure hunters that included his former best friend were climbing beneath the Seaside Heights Boardwalk to unearth a trove that he’d helped put there.

“We’ll have to pull up this carpet,” Mrs. Yearney said, exiting the closet. She looked at Scott. “Do you know what’s under here?”

“It’s hardwood,” he said, knowing his trade.

She winced. “Why do people insist on covering up beautiful flooring with cheap carpet.”

It actually was very expensive carpeting, as the current owner of the house was a general contractor who was retiring and moving to South Carolina, but he wasn't going to say anything. After decades in the business, he knew better than to debate a young, suburban wife for whom nothing she didn't choose herself would be good enough. Mr. Yearney had just accepted a high-level position with a tech company headquartered in New York, which had enabled the upgrade in price range in their realty internet searches and, as such, had shown any kind of legitimate interest in only one room so far: the home office.

“Whatever you like,” he said.

The two stood for a moment, the husband waiting to hear what his wife had to say next, as she thought. They'd seen the whole house already, and this was their second trip to the bedroom. Their response had been positive so far, across the board, with the exception of an array of cosmetic changes that Mrs. Yearney would be “forced to make.” What they didn't know at this point was that Scott had interest from another buyer, through another buyer's realtor, from just the day before – something he would lay on them when they got back downstairs, if he needed to. As dual agent for the seller and for the Yearney's, he'd just as soon keep the sale in the family.

“Might we have a moment, Mr. Belanger?” the wife asked.

Scott nodded. “I'll be down in the kitchen. Take as long as you need.”

He left the room, which gave him a few minutes to settle his mind on what was happening at the beach. After Peter's text the day before, he'd begun to search for any news surrounding the event, and stumbled on the community newspaper's web site highlighting a mysterious event to be held on the Boardwalk at 2 p.m. this afternoon. Had he not had the appointment with the Yearneys already set up, he might've thought about going, just to conspicuously hide in the crowd. Though he and Tim had discussed staying away, he thought he could get away with a covert visit.

It wasn't to be, though, but now he couldn't get it off his mind. He had many questions, the most important of them being how it would affect his life. He'd talked with Tim about some plans should things come their way. There was the jewelry, itself, significantly more valuable than when they'd put it into the sand. Then, there was how they got it, which would not be smiled upon by society. Of course, there was the possibility that they dug it up and no one was the wiser.

Which really depended on Peter. On the surface, he trusted his friend to keep their involvement under wraps. And if there was anyone who could scheme a way to do so, it was Peter. But Scott knew that Peter's interests in all of this weren't just to aptly remember Randy, nor were they to recover lost gold. Martin Ebel was clearly in his sights for the most asinine of reasons, and there was nothing any of them could have done to talk him out of it.

He heard footsteps coming down the wooden steps and looked up to see the young couple emerge from the stairwell.

Mrs. Yearney was beaming. "We'd like to put in an offer," she announced.

Scott smiled. "Outstanding."

Today had the potential to be a great day.

Or, a last hurrah.

\*\*\*

For the show, as the leader of the community, Martin descended the ladder first onto the sand, then stood watch as Stuckey followed him down. Then came their two diggers from the borough's Department of Public Works and, finally, Blythe.

He turned to see that the throng was making its way down the wooden ramp to the beach on the other side of the dunes, and gathering there as they had above – the array of cameras in the center, with everyone else around. Instinctively, he sought out Sanderson-Cox, who was still moving with the crowd, right where he wanted her. She was nobody special at this point, and could jostle for a good view with everyone else.



They'd talked about letting media come in with them for the drama of it, but were concerned about the logistics, particularly overcrowding. There would be no way to let one, or even just a few in, without opening it up to everyone. As such, what they'd agreed to do was to have Stuckey livestream the dig on social media, making the direct feed available to anyone.

The floodlights were already lit, so Martin motioned everyone under the Boardwalk, where they crouched and hobbled to the designated place. They'd already stationed his new metal detector in the right location so they could find the exact area quickly, and once the livestream began, with Stuckey holding her iPhone at landscape orientation from about ten feet away, he donned the headset and began searching once again. This time, after about sixty seconds, the chime toned in his ear, and he looked to the camera, pointing down. X marks the spot.

He took off the headset. "Here it is. Right here."

As he stepped away, the two young men from public works, Bradley and Shane, jumped in and started digging.

\*\*\*

Memories came flooding back to Peter, watching the two young men dig into the sand. Four decades before, it had been him and his friends in the same position.

Their system hadn't been perfect, though it had worked. By covering up the gold each and every night they worked, they also had to redig it up every time they needed to add to the cache. Of course, they didn't have shovels – they couldn't afford to be seen carrying them down, and leaving them would be a marker for authorities that something was up, so it was them on their hands and knees, clawing at the sand. Which was relevant here today, because, pending shifts in the levels of the sand under the Boardwalk, the stash shouldn't be very deep.

While meticulously standing behind the public works commissioner's live camera, he watched the men dig for several minutes, tossing sand to the side into a growing pile.

Suddenly, the taller of the two announced he'd hit something.

“What is it?” Ebel asked.

The man poked around in the sand. “It’s moving. Feels like a cloth of some sort.”

The livestream failed to show Peter’s grin.

\*\*\*

Now, Martin, himself jumped in, kneeling next to the pit. The two public works guys joined him on their knees, and the three of them began rummaging through the sand like dogs chasing a bone.

It was, indeed, a cloth they’d found – a tarp of sorts, designed to protect whatever was beneath it from the sand and elements. He noticed Shane try to get a grip on the fabric to pull it up.

“No, wait,” he stopped him. “Let’s clear the whole thing off, and then lift it. Otherwise, we’ll just pour the sand right back on top.”

Together, they followed the instruction while Martin noticed both Stuckey and Blythe inching forward for a better look. After another minute or two, they had the bulk of the cloth uncovered, and everyone looked to the mayor.

He took a deep breath – not for dramatic pause or the video, but because he needed to breathe after the digging – and said, “Let’s do it.”

Martin and Bradley each grabbed a corner of the tarp and peeled it back.

Exposing the most beautiful thing Martin had ever seen.

\*\*\*

The pit was about three feet deep by the time they’d found the tarp, so there were shadows from the sand blocking the flood lights. It was bright enough to see inside, though, so when Ebel and the other man had peeled back the cloth that only three people alive knew existed, immediately Peter could make out individual pieces of jewelry that he and his friends had tossed in forty years before.

He, of course, hadn't been responsible for all of them, but just the sight of watches, rings, brooches, bracelets and everything else brought back many memories of the exploits required to secure them. The stealth and precision, the gambits and the schemes. So many unknowing tourists, pompous New Yorkers and young couples. His hand went to the engagement ring dangling from a cheap necklace around his neck, and he massaged the piece in between his fingers. Everything had come full circle.

He watched as Ebel reached into the trove and pulled out a handful of items, inspecting them. He pulled a gold watch from the pile and dropped the rest back in, flipping the watch around in his hands to examine it. Looking forward to Peter, and then to the camera, he announced, "This is a Rolex. Good as new."

Out on the beach, they heard a cheer, which caught his attention.

The two men with him remained still, nervous about digging in, so Ebel placed the watch gently back in and grabbed another handful. He held it out to the camera. "This is big," he said. "Really big." He looked to Peter. "Is this what you expected?"

Peter was trying to hide his emotion, and having a hard time with it. After taking a second to collect himself, he choked back a lump in his throat and uttered, "Even better."

\*\*\*

Though he still had a press conference to finish, Martin was well past the political ramifications of what was happening there, under the Boardwalk. He'd been completely unprepared for the size of the trove buried there in the sand.

In a space that looked to be about four feet by four feet, and at least a foot deep beneath the tarp, whoever had stashed their treasure here had filled it with gold jewelry of every sort. A heaping pile of watches, rings and every other form that you could shape gold into had been secured and hidden here, and Martin knew immediately that he'd opened a Pandora's box. That it existed was one

thing. Who's it was, and how it got there was a completely different story, and he had a nervous feeling that he'd be dealing with it for a long time to come.

Apparently, going and buying a metal detector was, in itself, insufficient preparation for this, and his mind was spinning with what else needed to happen right now. Where would they keep it? How could they ensure its safety? What about insurance? It was too much to deal with having the livestream showing the world exactly what was happening, and the crowd of people behind him waiting to hear the good news.

He reasoned he could use the livestream, though, to show some leadership, and looked directly at Stuckey's phone. "I believe Commissioner Delaney is out there somewhere – probably still up above. Can someone please send him in here?" He paused for a moment. "This is an enormous day for Seaside Heights. Angela, can you please swing over here and show everyone what's in the sand here." She did, putting the full cache on-screen for a moment, then backing off. "We're going to end the live feed now, and head back out to the beach for the rest of the press conference. Thank you to everyone who's watching. We'll see you out in the sun."

Stuckey ended the feed, and put the phone down to her side. "What was that about?"

He motioned to the pit. "Look at this. This needs to be secure immediately. One, to keep it secure, but two to make sure that nobody thinks there's anything underhanded going on here. There's probably more than a hundred thousand worth of jewelry in there."

"More than that," Blythe said. "Gold's at fourteen hundred an ounce. That's a huge pull there."

"Even more so, then."

"Why cut the feed, then?" Stuckey asked.

"Because I needed a moment to think." Looking past her, he noticed a pair of legs coming down the ladder. A moment later, Charlie Delaney, Seaside Heights' police commissioner, appeared under the Boardwalk and made his way to them. "Charlie, thanks for coming down here. Glad that worked. We need a guard on this while we do

the press conference, and then some security to monitor moving this to... Boro Hall?"

"We don't have a safe," Stuckey noted.

"Damn. A bank, then? Can we get one of the banks to give us some space?"

"I'll work on that while you do the presser," she agreed.

"Whatever you need, Mayor," Delaney said. The commissioner was supportive of him, and had told him many times that no matter what the polls said he'd proceed as if Martin was going to be mayor for a long time. "I'll hang out here myself while you talk to the people out there, and I'll call some of my officers to help out."

"Perfect." He stood hunched and brushed sand from his pants, then looked at Blythe. "We did it."

"Yes we did," he said.

Martin put his arm around him as best he could in their crouched postures, and patted his shoulder. "Let's go tell everyone what we did."

\*\*\*

Did Peter feel bad about what was about to happen?  
Not one bit.

Even as Ebel put his arm around him, he was comfortable with the path they were on. He'd dealt with his failures for far too long, and now he was in a position to make them right. There was no turning back, and he saw no need to.

The mayor emerged from under the Boardwalk first and, presumably because they'd been watching everything happen via the live stream, the crowd erupted in cheers as he waved to them, holding up the gold watch. Which Peter took as strange, because what was happening had little to do with them. It was more the experience.

The public works team followed, and then Peter, himself, to no fanfare, though he could sense the buzz in the crowd. Immediately, as he stood straight, his lower back arguing with him, he scanned the crowd and made eye contact with the suited man, who offered the slightest nod in his direction.

The discovery team ascended the ladder to the Boardwalk, then followed the crowd's route down the ramp and onto the beach toward the second staging site, where the media waited. Those in attendance cheered as Ebel set foot on the sand. Peter could imagine his jubilation, knowing this stunt was buying him votes by the second. In one fell swoop, he'd successfully turned the tide on the election, and he was sure the mayor knew it. Plus, who wouldn't want to be cheered when walking up to a crowd?

Peter reached the beach, and his feet sunk in the soft sand as the group made their way to the makeshift dais. It was hot, almost uncomfortable, as every August afternoon was, and he could feel drips of sweat beading down his back as he casually took his place next to the rest of the team.

He'd waited a long time for this announcement.

\*\*\*

It was everything Martin could do to contain his enthusiasm. It was also everything he could do not to glance in his opponent's direction. He'd won this round, and he had a feeling it could be enough to carry him the rest of the way through the election.

A successful treasure hunt would make national news. The last time the mayor of Seaside Heights was on national news was during Hurricane Sandy, talking about the disaster. This was positive. This was exciting. This was the kind of thing that built name recognition. Kneeling over the pit, he would admit it was the first time since he'd kicked off his political career that he considered he might be eligible for higher office than mayor of a small beach community. If he handled this well going forward.

What he had going for him was that all of this was about the exposure, in his eyes. He wasn't thinking about the gold – if Seaside could keep some it and put it into a new project or marketing initiative, all the better, but it wasn't the priority. His singular goal was to buy enough political capital to secure another four-year term and not have to face a life completely devoid of direction. If the

state wanted the treasure, which he suspected might happen, given the governor's interest, that was fine. Blythe, certainly, would want some kind of finder's fee or something, but that could be worked out. As he approached the microphones facing the cameras and the crowd, for the first time in a long time, he was in the driver's seat.

As he went to kick off the proceedings, he felt someone grab his elbow from behind and turned to find Kopinski. She was holding out her cell phone, which he took. "Governor Devereaux," she said, but didn't need to.

He stepped away from the microphone and put the phone to his ear. "Martin Ebel."

"Mayor Ebel, this is Governor Devereaux," came a firm female voice. Martin had met the governor at a fundraiser at a donor's mansion in Barnegat the year before, but he wouldn't expect her to remember. "I had the chance to tune in to your live feed. Very, very exciting. Congratulations. Big day for Seaside Heights."

"Thank you, Governor. I appreciate your calling."

"Good move to get your law enforcement watching over the find. I wanted to let you know we'll send some state troopers to assist. They're en route already."

"That's a big help, Governor." Martin was waiting for the bomb to drop – that she wanted everything expeditiously moved to the state capitol.

"You have somewhere to safely store the contents of the cache? And transport is covered?"

"We do," he said, lying. While he'd settled with the outcome of the state taking over, he wanted to maintain control for a little while longer.

"Okay, that's good. If you need, we can make secure accommodations here in Trenton."

He nodded, though she couldn't see him. "I appreciate the offer." Realizing that close to 150 people were watching him and waiting, he looked to the camera pit and raised a finger. The governor didn't care that he was in the middle of the press conference – something he had to deal with if he wanted a future in politics.

"Okay, well, congratulations, again, and let Brenda know anything you need."

"Thank you, Governor."

He handed the phone to Kopinski without hanging up, and she turned and stepped away. Having kept everyone waiting long enough, he moved to the microphone. "I apologize for the delay," he said, his voice booming through the speakers, but still fighting the day's stiff ocean breeze. "That was Governor Devereaux, who was tuned in to the livestream, which I hope you were also able to see out here. She offered her congratulations on today's historic events."

People seemed happy and energetic, which was enlivening him. He'd done plenty of speeches as a small-town mayor, but few generally held the energy of a pep rally. Even the evening of his election night victory four years before, surrounded by close supporters and friends and family, had been more along the lines of when he'd won his senior class's science award in high school, when it came to enthusiasm. This was very different, and he wanted to be good at it.

"As you've now seen, our scouting was on target, and buried in the sand for however long was a treasure trove of gold jewelry. How it got there will likely be the topic of speculation, investigation and rumor for some time to come, but we had to start somewhere, and now we know it's real. It's rare that a real-life treasure hunt becomes available, and especially right in our own backyards, but here we are, and it is incredibly exciting."

He was proud of the "speculation, investigation and rumor line" – had come up with it lying in bed the night before. Sounded poetic. Almost as if he had an actual speechwriter working for him.

"I know that you'll have lots of questions, but I think I can answer some before they're asked," he continued. "First, the contents of the pit. I believe you were able to see inside on the livestream, but if not, it appears that there's a trove of gold jewelry about yea big, and yea deep." He demonstrated with his hands. "From what we saw, the cache is filled with primarily gold jewelry: watches, rings, brooches, pendants, and the like. We're going to make this a very public process, and itemize everything once we can pull it out from underneath the Boardwalk."



Questions started to come from the media, but he held up a hand, talking over them. “Hold on,” he actually said. “Next question is what happens with the items. Well, we have the Seaside Heights Police Department watching over everything right now, and the governor just let me know that state troopers are on the way to assist. We will be moving everything to a secured facility, and will be recording everything along the way. Now, legally, that needs to be figured out. Who the trove belongs to, and how it will be valued. We just don’t have the answers on that, yet. I’m sorry.”

More hands went up. “If I may,” Martin said. “Before we go to questions, I want to just thank everyone standing up here with me. Thanks to our wonderful public works department, and Commissioner Angela Starkey, who will be taking the lead on securing the cache. Thank you to Assemblywoman Fisher and Brenda Kopinski from the governor’s office for being here. And thanks, most of all, to Peter Blythe, who made us aware of this opportunity.” From the side, Blythe nodded to him, smiling. “We will certainly remember Mister Blythe’s contributions to today for a long time.”

Reporters started shouting questions, and this time Martin let them, but pointed to Jeffrey, never knew his last name, from the local NBC affiliate. “Has Mister Blythe requested any kind of finder’s fee for his role in this?”

Martin took a quick glance at Blythe, and noticed that, strangely, the dark, suited man was now standing behind him, throwing him off for a moment. He recovered and turned back to the front, shaking his head. “We have not discussed that yet, but I can assure you all arrangements related to the cache will be made public. At this point, all of our discussions have revolved around whether there was anything in the sand there, and what it might be. Now that we know, we can move forward with any other stipulations.”

“Who owns the cache?” The question came from Martin’s right.

He wanted a moment to consider why the mysterious man was with Blythe, but he wasn’t going to get it. “As I mentioned,” he started, “we’ll need to figure that out. But, again, we will keep you in-the-know.”

“Mister Mayor,” a young woman to the left outshouted everyone, catching his attention. “You mentioned an investigation into how the items in the cache got there. Who will be conducting that investigation?”

He pointed at her. “That is a great question, and I’m afraid I don’t have an answer for you yet.” He glanced to Kopinski. “I’m assuming we’ll take up the governor on her offer of help in that regard. Her resources are going to be far more extensive than ours.”

Knowing they weren’t going to get concrete answers, the questions fizzled. “Thank you, everyone,” Martin called. “We’ll have more information for you soon. Go spend some money on the Boardwalk.”

The media pit began to break up, with cameramen hauling their heavy cameras back up the ramp to the Boardwalk to get the footage back for preparation for the 5 p.m. newscast, which Martin wanted to make sure he was in front of a television to see. The crowd, still buzzing with energy, began to mingle or disperse. Kopinski and Fisher walked over to say their goodbyes, congratulate him and promise to be in touch, then Martin turned toward the Boardwalk to afford himself a deep breath. He noticed two uniformed Seaside Heights police officers descending the ladder to assist Delaney, who was presumably still stuck down below. The machine was working.

He handed one of them the watch he was still carrying from the press conference, with a request to return it to the cache. Feeling a presence to his side, he turned to find Brianna McDaniel from the *Asbury Park Press*, her reporter’s notebook in hand. McDaniel covered Toms River and its adjoining beach communities for the daily, and Martin knew her well. “Brianna, how are you?”

“Big day, Mister Mayor.”

“Big day, indeed.”

“Any chance I can ask you a few additional questions?”

He nodded. “I’ll try to answer them, but as you heard, a lot of this is still in motion.”

“Of course,” she agreed.

They both felt heavy footsteps to his right, her left, and turned to find Blythe and the mysterious man approaching sternly. Martin turned his body just in time

for the man to hold out a manila envelope for him, which he instinctively took.

“What’s this?”

“This is Simon Starr, my attorney, Mister Mayor,” said Blythe. He motioned with his head. “That there is our claim on the cache of jewelry you just dug up.”

Martin’s heart was in his throat. He could get no words out. Instead, he looked at McDaniel, standing in the sand with her notebook and pen at the ready.

“Sounds like a scoop,” she said, eyebrows raised.

## CHAPTER 13

“So, he has proof?”

“No. But he’s saying here that proof exists.”

Martin hadn’t opened the envelope, especially right in front of the media. Instead, he’d – wisely, he thought – immediately ended the conversation with Blythe and Starr and turned away, calling Naomi Grey, who served as the boro’s contracted attorney. She came immediately to the Boardwalk, where they slid away to Connie’s candy store to meet as quickly as possible. At one of the tables usually reserved for enjoying malts and chocolates, Grey was going through the documents he’d been handed.

“Oh, you’re not going to like this,” she foreboded.

“What is it?” Connie asked, sitting with them. Martin had considered that perhaps she shouldn’t be there, but he wasn’t going to ask for privacy after they’d requested to use her place to meet. He hadn’t wanted to go back to Boro Hall, because he’d be inundated with questions that he didn’t have answers to. Besides, her presence provided him some level of comfort, which he desperately needed right at that moment.

“It says here that you, Mister Mayor, are in possession of a photo documentation of Mister Blythe’s ownership of the items in the cache.”

“Me?” His voice was louder than normal, and he caught himself, looking at Connie. Fortunately, there were no customers in the store at the moment, though her daughter was working. “What do I have?”

Grey continued to read. "Photos taken in nineteen seventy-nine by Richard Ebel."

"Richard Eb- My father?" His phone buzzed in his pocket, but he ignored it.

"It says here that in that collection, you're in possession of, is evidence that Blythe is the rightful owner of the items in the cache."

"How would he know what I have?"

Grey scanned the papers. "It doesn't say. Do you?"

He threw his hands up. "I don't know. I have volumes – *volumes* – of my dad's photos. I've been meaning to go through them since he died, but have never had the chance. I have no idea what's in them."

"Oh, man," Connie said threateningly. She was holding her stomach.

"What is it?"

"I texted you right before the press conference. This all makes sense now." Both of them looked at her for a moment, then Martin reached for his phone. She grabbed his arm. "Well, don't bother now. I can just tell you. I called my dad down in Florida. I just didn't have a good vibe about all of this, and asked him about Peter Blythe. He said he knew the name, but couldn't place it – his memory isn't what it used to be. But then he called me back this morning and said maybe he'd remembered. Maybe. He said Blythe – he didn't know the first name, but he remembered his last name – might've been part of a group of guys in the late seventies that everyone knew were a pickpocketing ring, but nobody could prove or catch."

Martin sat back, letting out a deep breath. "So, it wasn't a friend of a friend."

"Yeah, he said no one ever saw the guy, but he'd apparently somehow bought off some of the workers along the Boardwalk, who'd talk about it openly. I bet that's the stuff they stole."

He was shaking his head. "It has to be. So, if they knew who was doing it—"

"Why didn't they tell the police?" she finished for him, then sighed. "My dad said that having wild stories about pickpockets actually increased visitors that year."

“Good lord,” he said. “Even back then, everyone wanted to be part of a story.”

“And your dad-”

“What about his dad?” Grey asked, still holding the legal documents.

Martin turned to her. “My dad was famous in the area for walking around the beach all summer taking pictures. Like, he was an institution here when I was a kid.”

She looked incredulous. “That was his job?”

He shook his head. “No, it was his... No, I guess hobby’s not even the right word. It was his obsession. Or, better, it was his... way of life. It’s just what he did.”

“So, how would Blythe know what’s in his photos?” Grey asked.

They all looked at each other, with no answers, until Martin guessed, “Maybe he saw him taking them, and is gambling that he caught him in the act, somehow?”

“Maybe he posed for pictures.” The voice came from behind Martin, and he turned and looked. It was Connie’s daughter, Laura, standing behind the glass showcase. When no one said anything, she repeated herself. “Maybe he posed. He seems like the kind of guy who would do that.”

“But wouldn’t your dad have turned them in, if he knew that was happening?” Connie said.

Martin was shaking his head again. “No. He didn’t care. He was super aloof. For him, if he knew something was going on, it was all about the photographic experience.” He paused. “It was almost like a badge of honor that sensational things might be happening, and that he didn’t care about it. It wouldn’t surprise me at all if in those photos, there’s pics of Peter Blythe posing for the camera.”

“But how would he know you have them?” Connie raised.

“Well, that’s going to be an important question to answer.” He looked at Grey. “Can he make me produce them?”

She was nodding, knowing the question was coming. “If the court wants them, yes. They can subpoena.

Especially if he's got some kind of evidence that he's right."

"I don't see how."

"Well, we'll probably learn soon enough." Grey glanced down at the papers in her hand, continuing to read.

Martin was anxious, so he stood and paced while she read. A lot had happened in the space of about thirty seconds, and he hadn't had time to consider what it meant. Just moments before, he'd been celebrating his impending comeback victory in the election, and now he knew that by the evening news – well, maybe by the morning news, if the *Asbury Park Press* wanted the exclusive on it, because no one else had heard what happened so far – he would look like an enormous fool. Blythe had led him straight into a trap, and had him actually dig the treasure up for him, only to claim it for his own. In addition to his embarrassment, he'd have to deal with the state, as well, and anyone else patiently waiting to get involved.

A thought occurred to him. He whirled toward Grey, interrupting her reading, and pointed to her. "It's a crime. If we're right, and Blythe was part of the pickpocket ring, it's—"

She was shaking her head. "No go. The statute of limitations is long past. Five years, I believe."

"Damn." He continued pacing.

"That's not to say that Blythe's actions from back in the day would be looked upon favorably, too comfortably. While legally he may have some claim, he'd likely have to overcome a big publicity hurdle."

"He'd have to know that," Connie said.

"Oh, I'm sure he would."

Martin ended up standing behind Connie's chair, and realized he had his hands on its back, comfortably. He caught himself, and stepped to the side. "We need to know what his play is. Does he really think he can just show up, take the gold, and disappear?"

"He may. Sure."

He sighed again. He was running out of schemes to foil him from doing just that. His brain continued to whirl, and he realized he wasn't going to solve it all right then

and there. “What’s our next step?” he asked meekly, sitting back down.

“Well, we’ll similarly have to make a case to the court that the treasure belongs, at least temporarily, to the boro. Then, the investigation can begin. You’ll likely have to produce the photos, which I’m assuming are catalogued in some way?” Martin shrugged. “They’ll have to go over the evidence and see what the truth is.”

He let out a breath and got to the question he needed to ask. “Is there anything the boro can do, so we can save face? Some kind of aggressive legal maneuver?”

She frowned sympathetically as she shook her head. “Nothing comes to mind. We kind of have to play the game.”

“But you can be strong when you talk to the media about it,” Connie offered.

He looked at her and nodded. “I suppose walking away from the conversation at first probably wasn’t the best thing.”

“Forget about that,” Grey said, standing. “There was nothing you could’ve said or done at that moment. We’ll catch up with this. I’ve already got a call in to the judge to see what next steps are here. See if we can get an injunction and push back.”

“Thank you,” he said, nodding. “Appreciate you running right over.”

She left with the paperwork as quickly as she’d arrived, leaving Martin sitting at the table with Connie, who clearly didn’t know what to say. Either did he, though.

She finally broke the silence. “You want a milkshake or something?”

That made him laugh, despite himself. “What I’d like to do is go crawl into that hole we just dug.”

“Look, Martin. Naomi’s on it. The boro hired her for a reason. Let her do her work.”

He was nodding, his mind far from the candy shoppe. “I guess I’ll finally find out what’s in those photos.”

“Maybe that’ll be good for you.”

He grunted. “Yeah. Maybe.” He stared off in the general direction of the dig. “I hope Petrelli gets back to Naomi quickly.” Ocean County Justice Deborah Petrelli



was who Naomi had indicated had Blythe's claim in front of her, for now. "We can't just leave that stuff sitting there open all night."

"I'm sure Blythe would be willing to sit there and watch it."

He started to answer that, but realized how ridiculous it was. A laugh escaped, and Connie smiled at him. He stopped and reset himself. "It's very nice of you to try to comfort me."

"We're friends, Martin. That's what friends do."

It occurred to him they'd come a long way in 24 hours. He didn't feel like he had many friends, and would likely have even fewer after this hit the news. A fitting thought as his phone buzzed in his pocket again. This time, he took it out and illuminated it, muttering at the same time, "Brianna from the *Asbury Park Press* has been trying to get me. I'm eventually going to have to tell her something."

Connie was defiant, perhaps urging him to be at the same time. "You're a politician. You say nothing."

"I can't say *nothing*."

"Why not? It's up to the courts now. You don't know what's going to happen."

The door behind him opened, catching both of their attention. It was Grey, returning. She was bringing her phone down from her ear, and came into the candy shoppe already talking. "That was the judge. She said that the property will remain in the custody of the boro until this can get figured out." She stopped feet from where they sat. "So, we can move it."

"Thank goodness. Anything else?"

Grey nodded with some frustration. "She wants the photos. You have some work to do."

He sighed, then shrugged. "It is what it is."

"I'd recommend moving that stash right away. Get it to the truck. Get it to the bank. Video everything."

"Blythe?"

"He can watch the video like everyone else."

Standing, he nodded. Looking to Connie, he said, "Thank you."

"We're here," she answered.

"Let's get this thing cleaned up."

He and Grey exited the candy shoppe.

## CHAPTER 14

“This is the last message I’m leaving you,” Peter said into his phone. “You know how to get hold of me.” He shut down the phone and stuck it into his pocket.

It was hot out here, with the late afternoon sun beating down on him. The temperature had hit 90 earlier, but now was a touch cooler. Still, it wasn’t like it used to be. All Peter wanted to do was to escape the heat, find some shade and celebrate the day’s proceedings with a cold beer. But Starr had advised him that leaving was a bad idea until they heard back from the local judge who they’d filed the claim with. They’d had a pretty good idea of what would happen – likely the cache would be entrusted to the boro until they could fetch his proof from Ebel – but just to be safe, they didn’t want anyone moving anything until they had some direction. It was hot, though.

To distract himself, he’d used the time to place phone calls to Scott and Tim. They were now involved. His calls were in-part to fill them in, but more so, in his heart, to engage them. He knew that no matter how they responded, he’d do what he could to protect their names, and would make sure they got their share. Randy, too. He would take care of his family, as well. All of that happening was even more important to him than his own piece of it. He’d roped them into the scheme at the beginning, and he’d had definitive purpose in doing so. There was no way he’d let them not see the fruit of their efforts, now that he had some control over the outcome.

He had strolled away for a few minutes, just to clear out some adrenaline. Forty years he'd been on this quest, and he'd finally made his way up the mountain to the treasure trove. Of course, he was going to be excited. After Starr had handed Ebel the papers and the mayor had stormed away to who-knows-where, a surge of energy went through him, and he felt like he was going to jump out of his skin. He'd excused himself while his attorney gave some droll comments to the young lady reporter who'd happened to be standing close by (unplanned, but fortuitous), and walked down to the water, where he stood in his favorite spot again, smiling to himself, and thinking mostly about Randy. Even said a few words in his friend's direction, though he wasn't a big believer in any kind of afterlife gathering of people, good or bad.

He'd taken about ten minutes to himself before returning, and now had stood in the hot sun next to the opening under the Boardwalk. Starr had explained the situation to the woman from the boro who ran public works, Starkey, and the officers now hovering over the stash, and without any direction to tell them otherwise, they didn't object to Peter being there. At one point, Starkey even sent one of her guys to get him a lemonade so he didn't dehydrate in the heat.

Peter wasn't the only one milling around. There were two Seaside Heights PD officers, a handful of young men from the public works department and Starkey, herself, who was on her phone most of the time. After about an hour, he saw her tuck her phone into her back pocket and quickly make her way up the ladder to the Boardwalk and out of his sight.

Curious, he hoped that it meant something was happening, which was confirmed a minute or two later, when Starkey reappeared, descending the ladder, followed by Ebel and an attractive woman in a grey skirt suit. They approached him, just as his phone went off. He grabbed it, looking for Scott, but it was his attorney.

Clearly, they were coming to talk to him, so he held up a finger and turned away as he answered the call. "Simon."

Starr was on the other end. "Peter, the judge said that she wants the gold to stay in the custody of the boro for right now."

"That's what we expected."

"Have you seen the mayor or anyone?"

"The public works commissioner has been here the whole time, but Ebel just showed up with a woman, who I assume is his attorney?"

"Yes, that's probably her. This works well, because they can take on the burden and cost of moving the stash for you."

"Well, that's nice." He couldn't see what the trio was doing behind him, but assumed they were standing there waiting for him. "What should I do?"

"Most importantly, don't talk to them. They'll want to talk to you. You just nod. Where are you right now?"

"I'm right by where we climb under."

"Okay." He'd anticipated the answer. "With the judge's order, you're technically trespassing, and they could remove you. They told the judge they're going to video everything when they move the stash, so your interests will be protected. What I want you to do is hang close, but get off the dunes, and head back up to the Boardwalk. Find some shade. It's probably broiling out there."

"Oh, thank goodness." He let out a sigh of relief.

"The other good news is the judge requested the mayor turn over the photos."

"Requested?" For the first time, he glanced back over his shoulder. Yes, they were standing there, waiting.

"A request that could easily be turned into an order."

"Okay."

"Alright, go get out of there, and I'll talk to you in a bit."

They hung up and Peter turned to face the three of them, standing there on the soft sand. "I hear we've had some movement."

"I take it that was Mister Starr," the woman asked. She stepped forward and extended her hand. "I'm Naomi Grey. I'm the borough attorney."

Peter shook her hand. "That was my attorney, yes. I believe I'm all caught up. I was actually just going to head up the ladder, there."

He noticed a hint of hesitation among them, confirming that they were at least thinking about making the trespassing play, now that they had the instructions from the court. Stuckey took the lead, pointing to the officers camped underneath the Boardwalk, "That's probably better. Don't want you to get in trouble with them for trespassing. No one's actually supposed to be down here."

He smiled to himself. They continued to be one step ahead.

"We'll oversee things from here," Stuckey continued.

The mayor remained silent, but Peter could feel his desire to unleash a roundhouse on him. He was struggling to be a good winner. Though the plan forty years in the making wasn't completely settled yet, he had the mayor on his heels, and it had to be incredibly difficult for him. At this point, Ebel was still unaware as to why he had such a target on him, and Peter was resisting the urge to make this the moment he found out. It would be so easy to capitalize on his peak of frustration. A biting comment, a piece of inside baseball that only the two of them would understand, even an outright explanation – any would get the job done. But it wasn't the time. Soon enough. First things first.

If left to his own devices, Peter, the consummate extrovert salesperson, would have had plenty to say right then. But he leaned on his better judgment, and clammed up, instead nodding and smiling. "I look forward to seeing the video of the move. You'll let me know when—"

"There was probably a better way to do this," Ebel said, being the first to break. Grey, the attorney, tried to silence him with her arm. Stuckey took the opportunity to duck under the Boardwalk, presumably to inform the stationed officers what was going to happen.

Peter looked him in the eye for a moment, still deciding if he'd say something. He wanted to, big time. He wanted Ebel to know just how inextricably tied up he was in the entire affair. The mayor had given him the opening to counter. But not now. There was enough

emotion involved, and still lots of work to do. Instead of retorting, he shrugged, as dismissively as possible. “Maybe.”

With that, Peter walked to the ladder and climbed up. When he reached the top, he headed for the closest watering hole he saw and bellied up to the bar. Even with things incomplete, it was a celebratory day, so he’d treat himself.

The bartender, a tattooed twenty-something with close-cropped hair approached. “Your most expensive bourbon, please,” he ordered.

## CHAPTER 15

“Who’s paying for this?” Martin asked, watching the armored car backing up to the Boardwalk ramp off of Ocean Terrace.

“I have some discretionary funds,” Stuckey said. “It’s all taken care of.”

He didn’t turn toward her, still watching as the truck’s reverse alarm toned over their conversation. “Do I know about that?”

“You signed the budget.”

He grunted. “I guess I did.”

Stuckey was a good and loyal colleague. He hadn’t thought about it until he was standing right there, but he was glad it was her that was close by at that moment. He didn’t trust most in Boro Hall, many of them with their sights already set on the next administration. So far, the truth of Blythe’s ploy hadn’t made it far, and he knew he wanted to keep it to a trusted few for as long as he could. For his public works commissioner, she’d been cool from the moment she’d found out. All in a day’s work – she would do what needed to be done. He wasn’t sure that he’d get the same reception from everyone.

In fact, he was convinced enough that he felt the need to say something about it. “Angela, I appreciate your professionalism here. This is a unique situation.”

She was quiet for a moment before speaking, and he wondered what she was thinking. Finally, without looking at him, she said, “The court gave us a job to do. I just want to make sure it’s done right.” Non-biased.

“Agreed,” he said, as the truck came to a halt, and a young, uniformed man with a shaggy goatee and wide, wary eyes, carrying a sidearm, hopped out of the cab. Stuckey left Martin’s side to approach him, and they chatted for a moment. She pointed in the direction of the cache, filling him in on the details.

Martin took the opportunity to head back to the other side of the Boardwalk, where a small crowd of stakeholders was now gathered, those present having now legally graduated from simply being “onlookers.” Grey and Starr were watching the most closely, with two Seaside Heights officers and the recently-arrived state troopers, having been recruited to unearth the treasure, catalog it, and repackage it into a handful of security bags the bank had sent over – all while being filmed by both the boro’s and Blythe’s attorney’s firms. Nothing was being left to chance. No one wanted anything to come back and bite them here. If a gold clasp came out of the sand, it had to make it to the bank’s vault.

Glancing back to see Stuckey and the driver following him, Martin climbed down the ladder once again and ducked his head down under the Boardwalk to make his way to the cache. Everyone was situated and cameras were rolling.

“The truck’s here,” he announced, then looked around. “Where’s Blythe?” he asked Grey.

She motioned with her head to Starr. “He’s being represented.”

Martin nodded. He thought Blythe would want to be there, but understood. A lot was at stake for him, and he might not trust himself to say something out of order that hurts him later. Martin considered that the same might go for him. But he wasn’t going anywhere.

“Mayor, we’re ready,” one of the officers, Dan Shepard, said. Ebel nodded, and Shepard pointed to two cameras set on tripods, feet from the opening in the sand. “We’re recording from two angles, per Mister Starr’s request. We will take each piece out of the pit, hold it up to each camera, give a brief description of it, then place it into one of the bags.” Stuckey arrived with the armored



car driver, both crouched. “Oh good, you’re here, too. Mister...”

“Terranova,” the man said.

“Mister Terranova will then take the bags to the Jersey Shore Savings Bank branch on Central, where the items will be stored in their safe until the court makes its determination on ownership.” Shepard looked up at the assembled group. “Does everyone understand?” Nods and grunts around the circle affirmed they did. “Is everyone in agreement on the process?”

“Who will maintain ownership of the safe rental?” Starr asked.

Martin thought he heard Grey sigh, which he interpreted as that Starr knew the answer to the question and was playing games. “Since the boro is financing all of this,” she deadpanned, “the boro will maintain ownership until the court decides.”

“Got it,” he said. Martin tried to follow the shenanigans, but had too much else on his mind.

“Let’s get to it then,” Shepard said, reaching into the cache for the first time, pulling out a watch and holding it up first to camera one, then camera two. “Men’s gold watch, square face... Well, I guess it’s a hexagon... Latch band. Single dial on the right side, controls the time and the date. On the face, it says, ‘I-W-C. Quartz Electronic, Da Vinci.’ No markings on the back of the watch, but four metal screws holding it on.” He turned the watch around in his hands in the flood lights. “That’s about it. Oh, wait, on the inside of the latch: ‘International Watch Company. Schaffhausen, Switzerland. Then, engraved is the number seven-hundred fifty.” He held it out for his partner, Lieutenant Jamie Frey, who Martin knew well, and she nodded her agreement with everything he’d said.

One of the state troopers, who Martin hadn’t formally met, held open the first of the security bags, and the watch was dropped inside. Shepard looked up at the two attorneys. “Are we all good on that process, now that we’ve seen it in action?”

Everyone agreed, so he reached into the pit and pulled out the next piece, a college ring. He held it up to the light. “Gold ring, heavy, Villanova University...”

It had occurred to Martin that out of all of them there, he might've been the one best suited for identifying the pieces, with his upbringing. While he'd only formally worked for his step-father for a short while in the summer after high school, he had spent considerable time at the jewelry store on Hooper Avenue, just hanging around. He'd definitely picked up a thing or two. He knew all the parts of a watch and could do simple maintenance. If he had magnification, he could discern the quality of a diamond. And he'd even once soldered a prong on an engagement ring back into place. In the end, he was never going to be the heir apparent to Alden Jewelers that his step-father had hoped he might be, but he considered the time well-spent. Given that he had enough challenges related to the cache of jewelry in front of him, though, he hadn't offered that expertise to the effort.

Instead, he watched as Shepard continued through about ten pieces from the cache – rings, a couple more watches, and a heavy gold brooch in the shape of a butterfly. Took about twenty minutes in all, after which he slid to the side and Lt. Frey took over. They'd worked out a plan to share the load, so the process didn't become too tedious. Or, at least any more tedious than it already was, he thought, peering over Frey's shoulder to see that not a dent had been made in the pile. He looked up at Stuckey, who shot him a “we're going to be here a while” face.

Martin sat down in the sand and watched the proceedings.

\*\*\*

Four hours.

That's how long it took.

Martin felt worst for the officers, who were uniformed in the August heat. As the most extraneous person present, he'd left a few times to get them water and lemonade from the stands above, because once the seal had been broken, there was no way they could stop. The two SHPD officers and the state troopers swapped cataloguing responsibilities a number of times throughout the afternoon and early evening, but stayed present the

whole time. Everyone else, including the young truck driver who Martin came to know as Billy Terranova, whose father, Joey, had graduated from Toms River East a few years before Martin had. Most importantly, Terranova had needed to move the truck to a better location than blocking a main entrance ramp to the Boardwalk and, as such, creating a buzz among everyone showing up for dinner.

Even Stuckey had run back to the office for something. Batteries had been replaced once in the camera. But the officers, and the attorneys, all stayed put. He didn't feel bad for the attorneys – they were making much more per hour than any of them, and Martin thought they could use some discomforts. Well, mostly Starr. But, eventually, after a thorough combing of the sand below the cache for loose items that may have shifted, the last piece, a thick gold disco-era necklace whose theft probably saved its owner significant back problems later in life, was pulled, itemized and placed into the security bag.

“That was painful,” Shepard admitted, wiping sweat from his forehead with his sleeve.

“I'm in awe,” Martin said. “Dinner's on me tonight up above.”

He laughed. “Thanks, Mayor, but I think I'm heading home, taking an ice cold shower, and putting my feet up.”

“Understood.” He looked to the others. “Anyone? Drinks, dinner?”

They all shook him off. The afternoon had been too long.

“We still have to escort Mister Terranova to the bank,” Frey reminded him.

“That will be recorded, as well,” Starr pointed out.

“Yes, Simon,” Grey, also uncomfortable, sweaty and probably drafting her resignation as boro attorney in her head, said with an insinuated eye-roll. “As we agreed.”

All-in-all, fourteen security bags had been filled with jewelry and watches – mostly gold, but with some exceptions. If Connie was correct about Blythe, he and his pickpocket ring had been strategic in what they went after. Martin hadn't had a chance since they'd talked after the press conference to look into her recollections, but he knew as soon as he got home and, like Officer Shepard,

washed off the sweat and sand, he'd be at his computer trying to find anything he could on the infamous Jersey Shore pickpocket ring of the late 1970s.

\*\*\*

Blythe swiped across his phone to close the text and set it down on the nightstand next to him, laying back on his hotel bed. Apparently, the dig was complete, and the parade was on its way to the bank, where the items would be stored until the court made up its mind that he was the rightful owner.

He'd get an accounting from Starr in the morning, but that wasn't the priority. The important thing was that he'd did it. Forty years of waiting, and he was just about to realize the fruits of his efforts. Their efforts. The team. He was doing all of this for them. For Randy. Even if they didn't know it or like it. He'd made a promise and he was keeping it.

What would come next, he didn't know. The things they'd stolen back in the seventies were obviously of significant value, so he'd have some new cash in his pocket. His life had already been adventure after adventure, so there was no need to take that big trip he'd had his eye on during his working days. All he knew was that he'd spend it well, and that he'd do so with a clear mind that his main goal in life had been accomplished. Who else could say that?

It was early, but he was in for the night.

A luxury that someone who'd accomplished everything they'd set out to do for the day could afford.

\*\*\*

Scott picked up a forkful of steak and shoved it in his mouth. He wasn't a stickler about talking with food in his mouth around friends, but when enjoying one of his favorite meals, he had a rule.

Tim waited patiently for him to finish. With Peter's news that the boro was digging up their treasure trove from the sand, the rules of the game had changed, and

the two friends looking in from the outside had decided an in-person conversation was necessary. They'd used the excuse to visit a restaurant they'd been to a few times in their lives, the famous Emerson Hotel in North Jersey, renowned for its open-faced steak sandwiches, and which happened to be about an equidistance drive time-wise for each of them.

Tim had already gotten a table in the dark, elegant brick dining room near the dormant fireplace when Scott arrived, and after a big embrace, they used the first ten minutes to enjoy getting together – outside the funeral, it had been several years. They talked about their jobs and impending retirements and updates on Tim's family. Scott needled his friend about a recent Yankees series sweep of the Red Sox, and questioned again how a guy who grew up in South Jersey could have ended up a Red Sox fan (Tim insisted it was necessary for professional success in New England). Quickly, though, they got down to business, interrupted only by their butter-drenched steaks.

“And you haven't answered him, right?”

Tim shook his head. “I'm actually not sure what to say. This is coming our way, and we're going to have to deal with it. I don't want to point in the wrong direction at the outset.”

Scott huffed and laughed. “You know what's crazy? He's going to cause us all kinds of trouble, but he thinks he's doing it *for* us. He believes that he owes this to us. And I don't know that we can talk him out of it.”

“Let sleeping dogs lie.”

“Well, that's not his approach.” They both laughed. It *was* Peter. “So, presumably, they're getting everything out of the sand today and, I imagine, taking it to a bank vault somewhere. I did watch the media coverage of the find this afternoon. Brought back a lot of memories.”

“I bet. We spent a lot of time under that Boardwalk.”

“Not for the usual reasons, unfortunately.”

“Speak for yourself, big guy.”

Scott grinned and stuffed some more steak in his mouth. “So, let's play this out. Peter says he has photos that that disco photographer took. Rather, he says the mayor has them. I'm assuming he'll get a court order to

see them. I don't know the legalities, but he's pretty buttoned up. I'm sure he knows what he's doing."

"How does he know the mayor has them?"

He sighed. "I think it's a bit of a gambit. He told me he'd connected with the photographer – Ebel's dad – like fifteen years ago through some photography web site. Said they'd actually had a conversation about the photos. I think he said he'd actually offered to take them, but the guy said he was giving them to his son. Then he passed away."

"So, he'd have to still have them..."

Scott held his hands out in surrender. "He does. Let's just go with the idea that Peter's got this all laid out, and it's going to happen exactly the way he wants."

Tim nodded and took a bite. "You're right. Safest bet."

A waitress arrived and refilled their waters, so they clammed up for a moment, both noticing they needed to be conscious of eavesdroppers. The story of the find was making its way through the media, though nothing had been said yet about Peter's involvement.

Scott continued, pointing his fork at his friend for emphasis. "So, the way I see it is that we have two things to think about. One, is the PR. If he takes out those pictures and we're in there – and we *are* – the whole story will come to us quickly."

"We posed for pictures with that guy a bunch of times. There's no way around that. *If* they have the photos."

"They have the photos. What are we going to do?"

"Well, you're a salesperson. I'm a businessman. We can figure this out. I checked with my attorney, and there's no legal or criminal piece to this. It's just about bad press."

Scott nodded, thinking. "Can we make it good press?"

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about?"

"Right? It's history. It's part of Seaside Heights history. Can we ask people to embrace that?"

"Problem is... If you were a victim, would you go along with that?"

He laughed. "Not if you use words like victim. They were part of an 'interesting historical event.'"

Tim waved his hand at him. "I know you old-school sales guys believe you can sell anything. I think there's a positive spin. I don't know that's it, though. What's the second thing?"

"The second thing? Oh, the actual value of the items. The way I see it, there's a lot that needs to happen with it, but ultimately Peter's going to show up on our doorsteps with a bag of cash."

"Yes. What are we going to do about that?"

Scott thought for a moment, then looked up. "Deflect it?"

"How do you mean?"

"I don't know. Give it to charity, or something?"

Tim was nodding along with the idea. "Okay, yes. I think this one's a little more realistic. That could be a reasonable failsafe if we can't stop him along the way." He held his arms out. "Peter comes to us with the bounty. We say we don't want it—"

"In a public way..."

"Yes, in a public way, we say we don't want it, and are going to give it away."

"Is that good enough?"

"Well, let's see," Tim took a swig of his water. "Put yourself in the shoes of one of the victims. Pick one.... That lady with the engagement ring, right before we stopped."

"I wasn't there."

He waved his hand. "Pick anyone then. That big Italian guy in the arcade, with the watch."

Scott nodded. "I remember."

"If you're still alive and you see this story, would that be enough for you? You had something important to you stolen forty years ago, and now you find out who did it. Would anything they do change your perception of what had happened?"

"Probably not," he admitted.

"If we'd stolen from you, would you be willing to stand in front of a microphone and say that you forgive us?" Tim paused, waiting for an answer that was silently spoken. "We can put all the good spin on it that we can conjure up, but if one person gets in front of a camera and goes on about how we took their grandmother's prized brooch that had

been handed down for generations... There's no coming back from that, no matter who we give the money to. There's going to be hurt, and there's going to be anger. The statute of limitations doesn't preclude that someone couldn't come after us personally."

"Legally?"

"Legally. Reputation. Social media. Anything. How important was the stuff we stole to people?"

Scott sighed. He was right. "So, we have to stop him. But, that's not to say we shouldn't continue to find a way to spin this."

"Yes... Or... Make sure the public never sees those photos."

"Which would leave all of this on Peter."

Tim nodded. "He's the one doing this."

Scott knew that figuring out how to interject himself into the legal proceedings to stop the photos from being seen would be the primary of focus for his thinking on the drive home.



## CHAPTER 16

Thinking he could make some kind of big score, Mister Ebel utilized the boro's resources to go on a wild goose chase that has left our great community in confusion. As has been consistent throughout his tenure as mayor, his actions were irresponsible and embarrassingly naïve."

On Peter's phone screen was Miranda Sanderson-Cox, Ebel's opponent in the upcoming election, taking advantage of his error in judgment to rip into him and build points for herself. While Peter did want to bury Ebel, he hadn't intended on paying too much attention to the race until later, other than knowing he was currently behind. Sanderson-Cox seemed like a good enough candidate, though watching her now, the sales trainer in Peter would have encouraged her to smile more. Even in an instance where she was trying to display anger and outrage, she came across as cold and hard. And it was, after all, a fun beach community she was vying to represent.

Peter was somewhat amazed that with everything he'd done in his career, all the adventures, he'd never had the opportunity to witness a viral story spread in real time. He had to admit, being at the center of it was thrilling.

It had been an interesting evening – enough so that Peter had given up on retiring early, and headed out for a walk, ending up sitting on a bench in a small park at the edge of Toms River, a spot where his family would sometimes bring picnic stuff for something to do on sunny spring days when things weren't open on the Boardwalk

yet. Especially captivating was the difference in approach between the regular media and social media. For the traditional news, once the *Asbury Park Press* story hit online around dinnertime, the other media started to pick up on it. It was a nice scoop for the young reporter who'd happened to be standing near them when they'd given Ebel the papers, because now everyone was trying to catch up. The story had changed from the cache, itself, to how it got there.

Which is where social media had now gone, only a few hours after the story had broken. Being a business guy, Peter was pretty adept with the business-related platforms, but didn't have family to be looking at photos all day, and never really cared about what was happening in the public news, so he wasn't schooled on the more social sites. Knowing he needed to follow, though, he'd quickly signed up for Facebook and Twitter, which he'd dabbled with in the past, and was navigating as best he could to follow along. Fortunately, all of the platforms used hashtags, which he understood, so he had both feeds open to #SeasideHeights, and they were yielding an active story.

A user named "JerseyBoy1971" was the first to post it – a digital copy of a story in the *Asbury Park Press* from the summer of 1979 warning visitors to Seaside Heights about pickpockets and to keep track of their belongings. Peter and his team had gotten a little bit of press that year, and he remembered the coverage. There was a nice '70s photo of a crowded Boardwalk in the mid-afternoon sun.

The internet ran with it, and almost immediately the day's news and the story from 40 years before were inextricably linked. Peter was guessing that Ebel's opponent in the upcoming election hadn't stumbled upon that piece of the news yet, because she certainly would have used it. Even though 40 years had passed, hadn't he just abetted criminal activity? The case could be made.

He knew the media would want more and more to talk to him, but he had no intention of making himself available. That had been Starr's guidance, but he'd determined that before they'd started. He was good on his feet, and could talk his way through any situation, but

they'd evaluated and determined that nothing good could come out of him talking with the media. Things were in the hands of the court right now, and until that process was completed, there wasn't much to say.

In fact, he'd given some thought to skipping town at this point. Starr could handle things here, and in many ways it would be better if he wasn't accessible at all. Remove the temptation to dive in. In between checking news updates and live feeds, he was scanning his phone for hotel deals in a few cities he'd been wanting to visit. New Orleans. Louisville. Austin.

Sanderson-Cox was finishing. "I call on Mayor Ebel to suck it up, cut his losses and end this pointless cause. This is not the distraction our community needs at our busiest time of year."

Peter laughed. It occurred to him that Seaside Heights was getting more press right now than it had gotten in a long time. As opposition, she had to find a way to spin that in a negative way. What he knew she had going for her was that Ebel was defeated. He could tell it just in his demeanor, and in the fact that he wasn't out front on this right now. If he had a plan to overcome the bad publicity, he would be attacking it immediately. The further the story ran by itself, the harder it would be for him to corral it.

As Sanderson-Cox's live feed of her press conference ended, his phone buzzed, showing him that Starr was calling. He swiped it off-screen. Didn't feel like talking to him right now.

Instead, he stood and pulled his earphones from his ears, tucking them into his pocket with his phone. He'd had enough multimedia for the evening, and decided to instead stroll along the water's edge. The fishy aroma of the river brought back many memories for him, kayaking along the shoreline as a kid, crabbing with raw chicken (illegal now, he'd learned) and bringing home buckets full of striped bass after spending entire Saturdays with a line in the water. He and Randy had been the tightest, becoming friends at the earliest age. Scott and Double T had come along later. He laughed at the memory of trying to keep a dirt bike stable while holding a fishing pole and

a bucket filled with water and sometimes as many as twenty fish. Somehow, they'd never crashed.

He took a deep breath, knowing this was probably the last time he'd ever stand in that spot, reminiscing. He knew he couldn't avoid coming back to town, but would make it all business when he did. Deal with the items from the cache once they were deemed to be his. Handle any legal responsibilities. Deliver Randy's share to his wife. That was it.

There was a deeper reason for that attitude, though, which is what was moving him right then and there. He'd spent the last forty years reminiscing. Pining over his youth. For him, it wasn't a curveball that he should've hit out of the park, or an open door to say the right thing to a cute girl that he'd missed. It was fulfilling a promise. Which, to him, was far more important. That promise was fulfilled now, which finally, at long last, freed him to look forward. He'd earned that, and the sights, smells and memories of his hometown were no longer required for him to find fulfillment. In fact, quite the opposite... He wanted to be rid of them.

One last piece of the puzzle remained, which was making sure that Martin Ebel knew exactly why he'd been targeted. There was a convenience, of course, that the situation had worked out the way it had, but Peter could not separate that those forty years he'd rued were the cause of one person. At the right time, Ebel would be made aware.

Currently, Peter's thinking was Election Night.

## CHAPTER 17

“I don’t want to go over that again, Mister Ebel,” Ocean County Justice Deborah Petrelli asked, leaning forward in her leather chair, comfortable in the home turf of her chambers.

“I’m sorry, Your Honor,” Martin backed off. “I just thought it seems relevant.”

Grey reached in front of him as she would if they were driving and had just jammed on the brakes. He got the point. It was the third time he’d raised the connection being made in the media between Blythe’s unveiling of the cache of jewelry and the infamous pickpocket ring in the late seventies. That Blythe’s gambit was legally allowed to proceed was mind-blowing to him, and he was frustrated that the court wasn’t seeing it his way, despite Grey having well informed him on the legalities.

“The only question on the table right now is... Do you have the photos?” Petrelli leaned back again, softer, telling him that while she was done with the topic, she understood his frustration.

Martin held up his hands. “I have... Photos. I don’t know what’s in them. They’re not catalogued. There are thousands of photos. And, I believe, even more negatives.”

She held up a clipped stack of papers. “The subpoena request is very specific to photos and negatives taken between April first and October first, nineteen-seventy-nine. To your knowledge, are those included in the photos that you’re talking about?”

He shook his head. “I’m sorry, your honor. I have no idea.”

Martin wasn't trying to be evasive. He and Grey had discussed early that morning before they'd headed to the Ocean County Courthouse in Toms River that they'd ultimately have to turn the photos over, but that it was Blythe's responsibility to find the proof. To be cooperative, he'd questioned why he wouldn't just go through the photos – something he should've done years before – and she'd stopped him, reminding him that his time should not be taken up on that at this point. Likely, he'd have to simply turn over the whole pool of pictures and see what happens. Her mind was focused on two things: One, that he knew where everything was – print and digital – and couldn't be accused of hiding anything; and, two, that given the new world of deepfakes and digital photo manipulation, her office would have to be present at all times as the photos were investigated. It was business, but not something she'd counted on capacity-wise, so it behooved them to try to find the yes-or-no answers quickly. But not until the legal process began.

Now, he sat facing the judge, Petrelli, who he'd known for many years from political circles, though she'd run and won with the backing of the Republicans in a significantly right-leaning county. She was a New Jersey Italian in her forties, with long black hair twisted into an oversized bun, thin and fit, which most people didn't get to see under the robe most would see her in. Most of all, from their limited official dealings, Martin knew her to be tough and no-nonsense. In an off-beat situation like this one, he thought her demeanor would favor the boro.

Also present were Starr, Grey and Petrelli's clerk, a young, clean cut man who'd been introduced as Rob Little.

Starr spoke. "It seems the only way to approach this is to get all the photos and have my and Ms. Grey's teams go through them. There has to be some rhyme or—"

Petrelli waved the papers again. "That's not what your request says. Mayor Ebel would have to stipulate to releasing the entire collection of photos."

"We'll stipulate," said Grey. "But we request that they be held by the court, and all investigation is conducted under supervision, and, given that these photos have

significant intrinsic value to Mayor Ebel, we ask that Mister Blythe commit to financial compensation if any of the materials are damaged in the process.”

“Are you representing the boro, or Mister Ebel?”

“I’m representing the boro,” she said, her answer prepared. “While the photos are the personal property of a private citizen, we believe that your client utilized Mayor Ebel’s position to instigate this process. As such, Mayor Ebel’s interests and those of the boro are currently aligned.”

“Mister Starr?” Petrelli posed.

He held his hands out. “What kind of damage will there be? We’ll be careful, and your people will-”

“These are forty-year-old items, Mister Starr. You’re asking Mayor Ebel to release personal items from his home that he inherited from his father. I think that some assurance that they’ll be protected is appropriate.” Grey was tough.

Starr hesitated for a moment, thinking, and then nodded. “We agree.”

“I don’t want to leave that hanging out there,” said Petrelli. “Naomi, I’m going to leave it to you to get an appraisal of the collection, so both sides know what’s on the table. This should be a simple process. Let’s not overcomplicate it.”

“Yes, Your Honor,” Grey said.

Martin watched the whole exchange play out. He wasn’t interested in the posturing, but knew that it had to happen. Grey had served the boro well, and would take good care of him, even though he wasn’t her actual client. The big thing on his mind was how many hours of expensive legal service would going through a photo collection from the ‘70s cost the boro? The budget to cover this debacle wasn’t infinite. Something Starr knew. And they knew that he knew.

Petrelli looked up at him. “Mayor Ebel, when can you have the photos here?”

“Ah,” Starr stopped her. “We’d prefer to have those photos picked up by law enforcement. Just to make sure they all get here.”

Martin glared at Starr, frustrated, but also knowing he shouldn’t be showing a reaction. He took a brief moment

to collect himself, then looked back to Petrelli. “I need to find everything. They’re in a few different places.”

“Can you pull everything together by tomorrow morning?”

He nodded. “I can. Yes, Your Honor.”

“Your Honor,” Grey jumped in, “one of the concerns we have is Mister Starr and his team dragging this process out to exhaust the borough’s resources, and get what they want that way. They are looking for a needle in a haystack, and it’s certainly possible that they could simply keep looking and looking and looking. The boro’s taxpayers can’t afford a lengthy process. We’d like to request a deadline. This should not go on *ad nauseum*.”

This time, Petrelli didn’t look to Starr. “I agree,” she said. “I want this wrapped up quickly. Deadline is one week from the moment the photos arrive. I’d like it completed sooner than that, but at that point the photos will be returned to Mayor Ebel’s home, and we’re done, whether you found what you needed or not.”

“That should be enough time, Your Honor,” Starr agreed.

She stopped for a moment, and flipped through Blythe’s request again until she found what she was looking for. “Mister Starr, you mentioned in the document that Mister Blythe had some interaction with Mayor Ebel’s father in an online forum. Is there a record of that interaction?”

He nodded. “My client did save those conversations, yes.”

Martin seethed. The idea of Blythe probing his father for information, plotting along the way, was the part of this that angered him the most. Even over his embarrassment of being led down a path, and Sanderson-Cox’s response to it in the media the night before. What bothered him even more was the idea that he’d had these photos sitting in his house for years, with an intent and promise to go through them, and Blythe – even with devious purpose – had shown more interest in his father’s work than he had. That devoured him, and made the entire situation a thousand times worse. His only hope for reprieve at this



point was that Starr would go through the photos and find nothing.

But, he knew that wasn't going to happen. Blythe wouldn't be going through all of this without knowing the outcome. This was not a shot in the dark for him.

Petrelli continued, "I'd like to have those, too. Like Mayor Ebel, I'm concerned about the financial toll on the boro, and if there's intel in those conversations that can help you narrow the search, I think we should be using it."

Starr nodded. "We'll deliver them simultaneously to the photos."

The judge demonstratively slid Blythe's request to the side of her desk, indicating that the meeting was over. "You have your marching orders." She looked to her clerk. "Rob, can you please make sure Conference Room 7C is reserved for them for the week? And..." She turned back to Ebel. "Mayor, if you had to estimate, how big is the collection?"

"I'm sorry. How big? How many photos?"

She mimed a square with her hands. "How big? How much space would you need for storage?"

"Oh." He tried to picture the different collections at home. A couple boxes of different shapes. A few stacks of compact discs. A random, tilted stack of framed eight-by-tens up in his closet. He motioned space with his own hands. "I'd say space for five or six moving boxes."

Back to Little: "That storage closet on the second floor, at the end of the hallway. That's secure, yes?"

"It is," the young clerk told her.

"Can you make space for, like the Mayor said, five or six moving boxes?" He nodded. "Here's how we'll do it: no one gets into the room without both of you here, and someone from my office."

"Sounds good," Starr said.

She pointed at Grey. "Same goes for you, though, Naomi. No stalling to get to the deadline. I gave you a week. I want it done in three days."

"Understood."

"Thank you, everyone. Good luck."

They exchanged silent pleasantries, and all left the office, Little remaining behind and closing the door behind them. Martin and Grey pulled to one side, and

Starr stepped twenty feet down the long, boring corridor, dialing his phone.

“Did that go how you wanted?” Martin asked the question that every client asks his attorney after a meeting.

“It was fine,” she said. “I’m glad that she agreed to the deadline. I don’t trust them to not let this go on and on. They’ve waited forty years. There was nothing stopping them from dragging it out until you couldn’t afford it anymore.” She paused. “It’s probably time to engage your own attorney, too. Just to have an extra set of eyes because it’s your personal property.”

“Honestly, I’m not really worried about it,” he said, having been thinking about it since Grey had made the connection in front of Petrelli. “I don’t care that they look through the photos. An attorney’s not going to be able to defend me from embarrassment.”

“Alright, as long as that’s a non-issue for you. Keep it in mind, just in case, though. If the judge had jumped in on Starr’s question, I wouldn’t have been able to—”

Starr approached from the side, his phone call done. “Good meeting,” he encouraged with a smile. “When do you think can we get started?”

“We can have everything ready for pick-up first thing in the morning.”

He thought for a moment, for dramatic effect, Martin assumed. “That’ll work. I’ll let the court know, so they can arrange everything. You think nine a.m.?”

They all looked to Martin, who nodded without a word.

“Perfect. We’ll see you tomorrow.” He turned and walked away.

“I hate that guy,” he said.

“Of course you do.”

“No, it’s not just because he’s on the opposite side. It’s just... Look at him.”

She nodded and smiled. “Of course you do.”

They watched until he disappeared into the stairwell, leaving the building.

“Why did the judge say, ‘Good luck,’ at the end?”

Grey laughed. “Not sure. I’m guessing this is a mess and she wants us to sort it out.”

“So she doesn’t have to.”

“Yep. She’s not going to be pleased if we come back to her without solutions.”

Martin sighed. “Hopefully, one will present itself.”

## CHAPTER 18

The first call had come in immediately as the office opened. Abigail took it, and hadn't put the phone down since. And that didn't include the e-mails.

Martin was consistently amazed how he underestimated people's ability to be conniving and shrewd. He didn't consider himself to be naïve, despite what Sanderson-Cox was calling him on the radio all morning, but then again sometimes he had to accept the idea to be real. That people would go out of their way to call in fake claims to stolen jewelry astounded him. His mind didn't work that way.

How did he know they were fake? Because all-in-all, there were about 125 pieces in the collection sitting in the safe at the bank. Yet, by late morning, the office had already fielded more than 400 requests. Martin kept checking social media to see if the whole situation had become some sort of internet "challenge," but couldn't find anything (which didn't mean anything – he was admittedly very bad at social media). Either way, there seemed to be a concerted effort to muddy the situation. For the first half-hour, they tried as best they could to treat everything that came in as a legitimate request, but that had to end quickly.

Martin tried to dig into some of his normal day's work – the Blythe situation had taken up a great deal of time, and he was spending as much time regretting getting involved as he was dealing with it. He envied Sanderson-Cox, as she had all the time in the world to make it

political and take shots at him. She'd done a live stream press conference the evening before, had spent all morning calling the radio stations, and, if rumor was correct, was organizing a rally on the Boardwalk for the afternoon, which promised to be a circus. At one point in the morning, he'd considered that all of the phone calls had been orchestrated by her campaign to keep him busy as she shellacked him, but had reasoned that it was a little much to win a mayoral campaign in a boro with a total of 2,800 residents. If she wanted it *that* badly, God bless her.

A knock came on his office door, and he yelled for whoever it was to come in. It was Abigail.

He smiled as warmly as he could. "Need a break?"

She didn't return the smile. Clearly, she did. "The folks at Shoreline called, and they just set the new message. Hopefully, that'll cut down on some of the calls."

Shoreline IT was contracted to handle the boro's tech. Once they realized things were out of control, they'd contacted them to set a voicemail message instructing anyone calling to e-mail instead. Martin let out a sigh. "Thank goodness. Who'd have thought?"

"We're over five hundred e-mails now."

"That's incredible. How'd it happen?"

"I haven't had a chance to look at it myself, but I think you're right about the viral sensation. I think it's being spread through Snapchat."

He laughed. "What? They're telling everyone to call us?"

She shrugged. "Looks like it."

"What are people saying?"

"They're being general. They had a gold ring stolen. A gold watch. Engagement ring. Nothing specific. Just throwing it out there."

"I guess trying to grab a couple hundred bucks for free would be attractive to people."

"And be part of something interesting," she added. "That seems to be more of a driving factor."

He grunted. "Did you think you'd be dealing with this when you woke up this morning?"

"I didn't know what I'd be dealing with."

Martin picked up a hidden meaning behind her words. There was uncertainty, which was understandable.

The entire situation had thrown the office into chaos. “Well, I’m guessing if anyone’s serious, they’d take the extra step to prove themselves, right? Why don’t you take a longer lunch, if you’d like. Disappear for a while. Get some fresh air.”

She nodded without answering and left the office.

Almost immediately, his cell phone rang. Naomi Grey.

“Martin, you should probably come over to the courthouse.”

They’d dropped off the collection of photos that morning, as promised – Grey and a legal aide had spent the morning at the courthouse monitoring Starr’s investigation of them. “You found something?”

“We did.”

“I’ll be there in fifteen.”

\*\*\*

The whole way to downtown Toms River along Route 37, Martin knew exactly what he was going to find when he got to the courthouse. Grey wouldn’t have called him otherwise. In fact, as he’d suspected, Blythe would never have set the situation in motion in the first place, without knowing exactly what he was looking for.

By the time he pulled into the Ocean County Courthouse parking lot, he was resigned to the fact that things were not going to go his way – to the point that for the first time, he’d earnestly begun to think about what he’d do with himself after Sanderson-Cox was sworn in as mayor. Driving through the heavily commercial corridor leading away from the shore, he defeatedly scanned the retail outlets and restaurants available to him for possible employment. He knew that realistically with a few well-placed phone calls, he’d be on his feet, but decided for this trip to allow himself to wallow for a bit.

His expectations were confirmed when he reached the conference room that had been set up by Judge Petrelli for them to do their work. On the table were two boxes, with the legal aides from each side poring over them. Grey greeted him and closed the door behind them. Starr caught his eye.

“You found what you were looking for?” Martin said, not wasting any time.

He nodded and slid a manila envelope across the table to him. “We believe so.”

Glancing at Grey first, who said nothing, Martin sat in an open chair across from Starr and picked up the envelope emptying its contents onto the table. Out came a handful of printed photos and several 35mm negatives. He went immediately to the prints, some of which were posed pictures of teenage boys on different days, in various beachwear. In three of them, they postured in front of the Boardwalk, flexing their muscles. Another picture showed two of the boys dangling gold chains from their fingers while pointing skyward in the Bee Gees famous *Saturday Night Fever* pose from the John Travolta movie. Yet another showed a young Peter Blythe holding up his hand with four rings on the fingers like the athletes that have won multiple championships. Martin’s heart sunk. They had their evidence, and his own father had given it to them.

“Who are the other boys?” he asked, picking up one of the negatives and holding it toward the light. The photos were small enough that he could make out nothing.

“They’re being mum on that,” Grey offered. “We’ll be discussing it with Judge Petrelli.”

“It’s not of any consequence at this point,” Starr asserted.

Martin couldn’t help but weigh in. “It seems to me that if Blythe is going to use these photos as evidence that the items belong to him, then these other boys would have just as much say. I’m assuming they’re friends. Or, *were* friends, at least.”

“We will make their identities known at the appropriate time. Now is not that time.” Starr wasn’t budging, and there was no reason to try to make him, other than to make Martin feel better.

“So, is this it?” He looked up at his attorney.

“Well, not yet. They’ll keep looking, but they’ve yet to find any specific evidence of Blythe, or his compatriots there, actually putting anything in the sand. The fact that they’re holding jewelry in some of those photos—”

“The fact that they’re holding jewelry is conclusive,” Starr interrupted.

“It’s circumstantial.”

Starr looked up at her with sarcasm. “If this were forty years ago, and you were trying to prove these four young men were guilty, those photos would be more than enough, and you’re well aware of that.”

“Well, it’s not forty years ago. We’re a long way from the finish here.”

That’s not exactly what was going through Martin’s mind. To him, the evidence was pretty damning – a direct link to Blythe and his friends. But the introduction of the friends had changed things for him. Because, while Blythe, himself, seemed hell-bent on seeing this through, where were the rest of them? Blythe was around sixty, so it wasn’t out of the question that they weren’t around anymore. But Martin had a hunch they were. The question was... Were they not here because they didn’t want to climb under the Boardwalk, and were happy to let Blythe get it done? Or, were they not here because they wanted nothing to do with their teenage friend? Finding out who they were was going to be important, because it could conceivably add three allies to either side of this contest.

Which was enough to restore some hope for him. He stood and stepped to the door, looking to Grey. “Can I speak with you for a moment?” She nodded and followed him out. “We need to find out who these friends are,” he said after the door had closed behind them.

She shook her head. “Well, he’s not saying who they are.”

“Can we... Can we find them? There has to be a way.”

“Martin,” she said calmly, “in a perfect world, we can do anything we want. But we’re not in a perfect world. We have a small, municipal budget. I can’t in good conscience encourage you to spend the kind of money it would take to do a search like that.” He started to say something, but she stopped him. “We’re going to have to go with the flow a little bit here. We’ll find out eventually.”

“But if we find them, we can learn the whole story, and they may not be as avid as he is to do this.”



Grey sighed, then motioned with her head for him to follow her. She walked down the long corridor and outside into the sunshine, then down a short flight of stairs to a treed area. She took a place in the shade on the hot day and turned to him. "Martin, I need to impress upon you that this is not the biggest deal in the world. I know you have a personal stake in this, and I feel for you. It's upside down, and I'm sorry that you're caught in the middle of it. It's a bizarre circumstance that Blythe is taking advantage of. But, as mayor of the boro, you need to put that first. We got Petrelli to agree to help us keep costs to a minimum on this. And, within the boundaries of our budget, we will put up a good fight and try to salvage what we can. But we can't go crazy here. You shouldn't let us go crazy."

It was a softly-put reprimand that he needed. He said nothing, though, simply nodding.

"I know you're having a hard time with this upcoming election. My advice to you is to fight that fight within the parameters of doing what's right for Seaside. Which might not be the same as fixing this personal embarrassment you're experiencing."

"Ouch," he said. "Is this coming from an attorney or a friend?"

"You decide."

He let out a breath. "But we can beat this."

"Oh, I agree."

"Even after seeing those photos?" he pointed back toward the conference room.

"Well, yeah. Unless your dad climbed under the Boardwalk and took a picture of them gathered around a pit in the sand, you can't definitely say that they were responsible for it."

"I really wish we could get them on the crime, itself."

She shook her head. "Let that one go, Martin. The judge told you three times already. It's not a factor."

"I know, but—"

"Let it go."

That caused him to break and smile. She was right. He was worked up because he'd been caught off-guard, and since the moment it had happened, he'd been trying to figure out how to save face. The fact that Sanderson-Cox

was needling him every opportunity she got, trying to put a nail in his proverbial coffin, made it worse. He needed to force himself to take a break, and get away from the situation, to clear his emotions out. Let the situation play itself out a little more. Take Grey's advice and cool out a bit.

Then, he could focus on destroying Blythe.

## CHAPTER 19

Here, he's devolving into politics again," Martin said, pointing at the pages in front of him, Connie sitting across from him and a large vanilla malt shake between them on the table.

"He seemed to have done that a lot," she said.

"Yes, he liked to weigh in. I don't know if it's appropriate for a photography message board, but people seem to get along with him."

Grey had swung by his house after they were done at the courthouse for the day and dropped off a hefty stack of papers documenting the interactions between Blythe and Martin's father on the photography message board some fifteen years before. As much as he disliked Blythe these days, he had to admit he was impressed with his thoroughness, having the presence of mind to hang onto something that would come in handy more than a decade later. After he'd thrown a quick dinner together for himself, he'd started to go through the pages, but found it was more emotional for him than he thought. Given the day he'd already had, he wanted company and had called Connie, who invited him to the sweets shoppe.

He laughed. "He actually, he told me, would get into trouble in these forums because of his politics, and get booted."

"They threw him out?"

"Yes, but he'd always work his way back in with another name. It was a game to him." He held out the papers for her to see. "See, here in this chain of posts, his name is Han Solo. But then, whenever he got tossed, he'd just re-

sign up as another *Star Wars* character, and use that one until the moderators figured it out.” He flipped ahead some pages, excitedly finding what he was looking for. “Here. Obi Wan Kenobi. Same guy. He got such a kick out of it, because his friends in the forum would find him, but it would take the group facilitators a while.”

“Were you close?” She was leaning forward on her hands, interested.

He shook his head. “Not until later in life. It was hard when I was a kid, because he was out doing this beach thing. No idea how he sustained himself. He was just always out taking pictures. That was his thing, and he and my mother had divorced by then. She was remarried to my step-father, who owned a jewelry shop on Hooper Avenue. It wasn’t until I was older. Both my mother and David had passed away by then. We reconnected and had the chance to spend some good time together before he passed away, too.”

“David’s your step-father?”

He nodded. “Good guy. Took good care of me. I think he envisioned my taking over the jewelry store when he wanted to retire, but it wasn’t in my blood.” He’d been scanning the pages as he talked, and a section denoted by yellow highlighter caught his eye. “Oh, here’s an interaction between Han Solo and Blythe – I’m assuming the username PBandJelly is Blythe.”

“Peter Blythe,” she realized.

Skimming, he gave an overview, “This was October, two thousand five. Some other people are talking, and he’s sharing some beach photos. Here’s one of the Boardwalk. The pier. Now, Blythe jumps in.” He read out loud:

PBandJelly: Great shots. You said you took these over six years. How many do you have?

Han Solo: Oh, thousands. LOL.

PBandJelly: All of the same beach?!

Han Solo: Not just the beach. The boardwalk. The ocean. Most importantly, the people.

PBandJelly: I love photographing people. I’d love to see them sometime.

Han Solo: To be honest, I've wanted to catalog them, but it's too much. Overwhelming. Prints, negatives. I'm getting old ha ha. I like taking photos. Someone else will have to take on that project.

PBandJelly: Well, if you ever want any help, I'd be happy to. Honored to.

Han Solo: I was hoping my son might be interested. But he's off on his own path now.

PBandJelly: How old?

Han Solo: 30s

PBandJelly: Busy time of life. I can see why he might not have the time.

“The time stamps here say that Han Solo didn't answer for like three hours,” Martin said. “That's interesting.”

“Maybe it wasn't a topic he was a fan of.”

He grunted. “Maybe. But then, after a while, he comes back again”:

Han Solo: Maybe I'll take you up on that.

PBandJelly (immediately): No pressure. Just if I can help. I'll send you my contact info in a private message.

“Then, the conversation stops.” He flipped forward until he found another highlighted section, scanning it. “No, this part's all about politics. Looks like people talking about early presidential candidates.” He laughed. “My dad is on here pumping up Rudy Guiliani.”

“A lot of people thought he was the guy,” Connie said.

He looked up at her. She was something. She wasn't just humoring him and helping him get through this. Giving him a place to sit. She was genuinely listening, offering input. He'd wanted to get closer to her, but he couldn't say that he'd approached the idea with any kind of strategy or willful intent. But, was it happening anyway? Or, was she just that nice of a person that she'd drop everything to help someone in need?

He continued to flip through the pages – it looked like Blythe had merely captured all of his own conversations on the platform, rather than hunting down his

interactions with Martin's father. "Here we go," he said when he found the next one, again skimming it for an overview. "Oh, this is good," he called out:

PBandJelly: My friend. It's been a while. (*Martin added, "the date is now January, twenty oh seven."*)  
How are you?

Obi Wan Kenobi: Pretty much in a perpetual state of being under the weather. You?

PBandJelly: That's sad to hear. I'm doing well. I haven't been on in a while, but I picked up a new [CAMERA] and was excited about it. Thought I'd hop on and visit some old friends.

Obi Wan Kenobi: You sure you can handle a piece of equipment like that? LOL With great power comes great responsibility.

PBandJelly: ROTFL. I'm trying my best. Trying to emulate your beach photography.

Obi Wan Kenobi: Ah

PBandJelly: Whatever happened to your collection? You were trying to get everything catalogued.

Obi Wan Kenobi: I gave up. Don't have a lot of energy to do much anymore.

PBandJelly: I'm sorry. Is everything ok?

Obi Wan Kenobi: Not according to the doctor.

Martin looked up at Connie. "He was diagnosed with lung cancer somewhere around this time. The last couple years, he was mostly homebound." Now, she reached over and patted the back of his hand, still holding the papers.

PBandJelly: I'm sorry to hear it. If there's anything I can do.

Obi Wan Kenobi: Saying hi every once in a while is nice. I appreciate the check in.

PBandJelly: And the photo collection? That's your legacy. I refuse to let that project go undone. I insist you let me help you.

Obi Wan Kenobi: Oh, I shipped everything off to my son. The ball's in his court now. Probably won't ever get done, but at least I know they're safe.

PBandJelly: Can I reach out to him? I'd really like to help.

Obi Wan Kenobi: No. I'm happy with where things are. Thank you, Peter.

"He really wanted those photos," Connie said.

"Now, we know why. Look, he called him Peter at the end there. So, they must have exchanged information offline. This is insane."

"So, he's been after those photos for a long time. How could he have predicted you'd become mayor?"

He shook his head, sitting back and setting the papers down on the table. "He couldn't have. That was years before I took office. Though it seems like it didn't matter. He needed the photos anyway. My being elected mayor was just a means to an end."

"So, why wait so long to make his move? He could've approached you years ago. Or, at least, once the door was opened for him by you becoming mayor, any time in the last three years."

He sighed. "That's something I might have to ask him." There were many levels to the situation that required his attention, but the foremost in his mind at this point was a way out. When he'd seen the photos earlier in the day of Peter and his crew posing for his father's camera, his gut told him the path was set. The only thing left hanging was where he'd be standing when the dust settled. "Knowing that might be the only way out of this."

\*\*\*

The timing of Blythe's posts was what was running through Martin's mind as the cool water of the Atlantic Ocean washed over his feet and ankles. In the midst of everything he was currently dealing with, including his imminent trouncing in the upcoming election, now he was saddled with guilt.

He remembered the conversations surrounding his father sending him the collection of photos, and the day he received them. There were high hopes that Martin would take the ball and run with it – create a legacy of his dad's work. He was in the position to do so, living in

Seaside Heights and already working in the local government there. The photos from the 1970s would be a viable asset to the community's tourism story and history, and would bring back a lot of memories for people who had visited over time. He'd had an opportunity to do something special not only for the area, but in the memory of his father.

Instead, the first time he'd looked at the photos was the day that snake of a lawyer Starr and his conniving client Blythe demanded to see them. That hurt.

To her credit, Connie had recognized that something had walloped him, and suggested that maybe some time alone would be good for him. He'd smiled at her authenticity. It hadn't been a ploy for her to get back to work. She'd read exactly what he needed, and she'd been right. The breeze, the water and the sand between his toes all took him back to a time that he desperately needed to revisit right now.

His father had traded beaches, opting for the more year-round attractiveness of South Florida than his home of the Jersey Shore. Martin had gotten off the plane in Fort Lauderdale and driven north to Jupiter. Not the Jupiter where all of the celebrities and pro athletes had their mansions – his father lived in a small condo inland a mile and a half. But the Jupiter Inlet was his new photo studio, and he'd amassed a collection at least as big as his Jersey Shore set. If the original task of cataloguing had seemed overwhelming, it had gotten no better.

Martin would visit South Florida several more times before his father passed away two years later, but this trip stood out in his mind. He hadn't seen his father in three years, just from the busyness of life, and not from any relationship disconnect. He'd long ago accepted that his dad was going to do what he was going to do. But now the call had come. He wanted to talk with his son about the future.

It was this trip that he'd learned Richard's health was beginning to fail, and that there were some things he wanted his son to know and do. That had been the proclamation when he'd walked in the front door of his condo and they'd embraced, but then the trip had been



somewhat casual. No grand reveals. No specific wisdom that needed to be passed on. Just a dad and his son spending a great few days enjoying being together. Martin hadn't needed him to unveil the truth about his health – he'd picked up on it immediately. But, they'd talked about it openly like adults should, and then went back to catching up on lost time.

Only one topic held specific weight, and that was the large boxes in the middle of his living room, all taped up and addressed to Martin's home in New Jersey. It was Richard's entire collection of photos, being passed on to his son while he still had the presence of mind to get it done. There was nothing else he owned besides his cameras, for which he had specific plans (one would go to Martin), that he would deal with himself at the right time. But, it was on this trip that he asked Martin, at some point in his life, to organize the photos so people could know what was in them.

Even then, Richard had told him once they were organized that he could do whatever he felt was the right thing to do with them, but he hoped that by giving them to his son, those photos were being put into the right hands. Martin remembered – and he remembered it as soon as he read it through the yellow tint of Blythe's highlighter – that his dad had mentioned having an offer from one of his "buddies in the photography group" to take on the project, but as the dutiful son, Martin had said that was nonsense. He could be trusted to follow through.

Of course, to date none of that was true, and that's what was plaguing him standing there on the beach, the dinner hour thinning the crowd around him, when he heard someone call his name.

"Mayor Ebel," the voice came from behind him again.

He turned to see a man, upper fifties, maybe into his sixties but in good shape, striding toward him, struggling to churn his steps through the sand. The bright neons of the Boardwalk silhouetted him, so he couldn't make out facial features until he was closer. Once he did, Martin immediately recognized him, but couldn't place where.

"Can I help you?"

"Mayor, my name is Scott Belanger."

The name and the face connected for him. “Scott Belanger,” he repeated. “The realtor? On the signs?”

“Yes,” he said, nodding. “I’m guessing by now you’ve seen the photos?”

“Which photos?” He wasn’t hiding anything. That someone would approach him on the beach and ask about photos confounded him for a moment.

“The photos of Peter Blythe and his band of miscreants?”

Martin’s breath escaped him. “Oh. Those photos.”

## CHAPTER 20

Peter adjusted his position about twenty feet down the Boardwalk and tried again, pointing his Nikon D5000A toward the Casino Pier and using the corner of southeast edge of the pier to frame the photo. The new perspective gave him more of the green-blue Atlantic Ocean in the background, behind the amusement rides.

He knew he wasn't a good photographer, but during his time posing as someone who knew what he was talking about in online photography forums a decade before, he'd actually absorbed a few things. Unfortunately, what he learned was more about portraits, and even as he snapped multiple photos to the digital display, he knew they wouldn't pass muster with his old photography friends if they'd had the opportunity to critique.

That was despite the quality of his equipment, which as far as he knew was pretty darn good. He hadn't purchased it, himself. He wouldn't have known where to begin, beyond recommendations he pulled from the message boards. To help him stay in the conversation at the time, he'd bought a used Canon EOS Rebel, which had been a fun one for him to play around with, never having any real intention to dig into the hobby.

No, this camera was special – a prized possession. It was given to him by a friend that he'd only met virtually, through the message boards. Before he'd died, Richard Ebel had left his apartment, at great discomfort to himself, boxed up one of his cameras, and sent it off to him as a token of thanks for befriending him the last few years of

his life. It had arrived at Peter's apartment – he was living in Nashville at the time – unbeknownst to him, as he was traveling for work. He didn't receive it until the following week, when he got home from a West Coast swing for the sales job he was working at the time. As much as everything he'd been doing was part of some scheme, he'd been moved by the gesture. When he contacted him to thank him, Richard had shrugged it off, claiming only that he didn't want the camera to go to waste. By the time he'd reached out, Richard had been moved into Hospice, and died about two weeks later.

Peter knew that no matter what happened with Martin Ebel and the conclusion of his forty-year plan, he would not be letting the mayor know that he was in possession of his father's camera. A gift is a gift, and had Richard wanted his son to have it, he would've sent it to him instead.

Taking another whack at the scene in front of him, he snapped a few more pics. The sun was coming in and out from behind sporadic clouds, so he tried a few different takes on the early evening shadows. He didn't know what the photos would be used for, and supposed that whatever the outcome of his gambit here was would decide it. If he failed, which he thought was a longshot, maybe he'd use his favorite shot as screensaver or something. But, if he won, this one, or some other he took today, was being blown up as big as he could make it and it'd hang perpetually on the wall wherever he chose to live.

Turning and walking south along the Boardwalk, away from the rides, he reflected on those days right after Richard's death. He hadn't used the camera in those couple weeks, but when he'd gotten the news in the message boards that everyone's favorite curmudgeon had passed away, he took it out and found a reason to put it to use. He'd taken a day trip up into Kentucky to the national park and spent a few hours pretending as though he knew what he was doing. To this day, an album of photos from Richard's camera sits on his coffee table back home in Chicago.

But the overwhelming sentiment he remembered whenever he held this camera was the defeat he felt upon Richard's death. He had done everything he could to get

as close as possible to those photos of Seaside from 1979, and he had fallen just short. Richard's son was in possession of them, and there was no logical reason why he should ever ask for access to them.

Then, an amazing thing had happened. A handful of years later, a random Google alert had let Peter know that Richard's son, Martin, had thrown his hat into the ring to be mayor of Seaside Heights, NJ – his old stomping grounds. Suddenly, hopelessness was replaced with the energizing breath of life. With Ebel's son in the limelight, he could create leverage to make the story held within those photos public, and he immediately began to recraft his strategy. That plan was what had him here today, meandering the Boardwalk taking pictures while Ebel and his team scrambled to figure out what they were up against.

It hadn't been automatic, though, that Ebel would be elected. In fact, as Peter followed the race, it looked for the most part that he had little chance. Since a losing candidacy did him no good, Peter had taken it upon himself to get involved.

He knew he wasn't going to come home and put himself in the middle of anything, but he spent significant time contemplating what he might be able to accomplish from afar – countless hours poring over social media and learning more about how local political races were run than he could've possibly envisioned. He even hired a data consultant to look at Seaside's economy, trying to come up with something to poke a hole in.

One afternoon, he stumbled on it, and with the help of the gods of professional football, was able to make his move. In June of that year, once he'd learned of Ebel's candidacy, he'd created a Twitter account and set about at building a network in the Seaside community. By the time he discovered his next step, the account @itscalledporkroll had more than 300 followers that most of whom, he felt comfortable, were actual people from Seaside, and he turned up his rhetoric about the upcoming election. Nothing crazy. No bombshells. Just trying to use his personality and wit to engage people until he found what he was looking for.

That came on a random Saturday morning, sitting in the dentist's office, of all places. Peter was scrolling through Michael McMasters', Ebel's opponent, personal Instagram account when he noticed something he hadn't seen before: a video in which the mayoral candidate had been tagged where he was yukking it up with friends at what appeared to be from the timestamp a Dallas Cowboys playoff game. He was decked in Cowboys' gear from head-to-toe, and, from the caption, celebrating a go-ahead touchdown over an unidentified team (Peter had looked it up later – it was the Eagles).

Where fate came in was that, to Peter's benefit, at that time the Cowboys and Giants were vying to win the NFL Eastern Division and were running neck-and-neck all season. Fortuitously, two weeks before Election Day that year, both teams had identical records, and were tied at the top of the standings. Seaside Heights was Giants Country, and McMasters was running a race so small that a swing of 30 votes could change the outcome. With his mildly-popular Twitter handle as his weapon, Peter released the video to the public with a single tagline: "This is disconcerting."

It took off like hellfire – faster than he'd even imagined it could. McMasters' support in the community tanked quickly. Local media picked up on it, putting microphones in the candidate's face and asking him if a politician's favorite football team was important to know. One of the local radio stations dedicated a two-hour segment to a fiery conversation about whether people should be voting based on what sports teams the candidate supports. The point was, it didn't matter, as the damage had already been done. McMasters had little time to respond before the votes were cast, and Peter wasn't sure that if he had he would've had anything productive to say. Ebel rode the wave to victory, and McMasters never recovered. Doing his due diligence to follow the story, Peter had learned that he'd actually moved out of the community, settling further inland in Freehold.

To this day, the only person on the planet who knew that Peter had involved himself was Peter. He'd kept the Twitter handle open, just in case a need for it ever arose

again, but it had done its job, and he'd successfully put his chess pieces in place for today.

His meandering had taken him, accidentally or intentionally, to the doorstep of Ebel's friend's candy shoppe. He'd been contemplating visiting, just out of sheer curiosity, and had done some homework on the place after seeing the mayor visit and then bring the redheaded woman out to the Boardwalk to show her where the cache was. There was something going on between them, and to cover all bases, Peter wanted to know if it was personal or professional.

Feeling as though he should, he pushed the door open and entered, bells going off overhead and announcing his arrival as the familiar smell of chocolate hit him. Instantly, he had a recollection of the shoppe – the location of the display cases, the endless array of jars of gummy candies. While it hadn't connected with him from outside, he knew he'd been here before, long ago.

There were a dozen people inside, milling about. Young parents with two kids were trying to talk their kids out of most everything they picked up, to the exhaustive point where Peter wanted to just walk over and buy it for them. A teenage boy and girl were facing the far wall, trying to choose a "Buy 4 Get the 5<sup>th</sup> Free" from a vast lineup of weird-flavored sodas. There were a few people in line, as well, so no one paid much attention to him as he walked in, his Nikon dangling around his neck.

Peter scanned the area for the redheaded woman who was friends with Ebel, but she was nowhere to be seen. He figured she'd recognize him if she did see him, but hadn't determined whether that was a good or bad thing. He knew that walking into the store came with an air of smugness, because if she did see him, it would be reported back to the mayor quickly. But, alas, she wasn't around.

If he'd been right that the younger redhead was the woman's daughter, she was there, working behind the register, cashing out customers. A brunette with a bouncy ponytail was fulfilling chocolate orders from the glass display case. The atmosphere was fun and bubbly as a candy shoppe in a tourist area should be.

He sidled into line and waited his turn, which came after a few minutes. Stepping up the counter, he held out

his phone for the young girl behind the counter to see. “I looked you up on social media, and saw this ad.” He’d brought up a coupon for \$1.50 off of a milkshake that he’d pulled off of their Facebook page.

“Fantastic,” she said. “What can I get you?”

“How about a, uhhh...” He perused the menu overhead. “A strawberry banana.”

“Perfect,” she said, entering it into her machine – one of those tablet point-of-purchase systems.

“Wow, those have come a long way,” Peter said. “I used to sell credit card processing machines back in the day. Long time ago.” The girl smiled politely as she turned the screen toward him so he could scan his credit card, which he did. “Can I ask – how long as this candy shoppe been here?”

“My grandfather opened it in nineteen seventy-four,” she said. “He retired about ten years ago, and my mom’s been running it ever since.”

“Good for you,” he said, enthusiastically. “I grew up in Toms River, and when I walked in here I had a flood of memories come back. I knew it had to be around while I was here.”

She turned the screen back to herself and printed him a receipt, then leaned around the cover of the display case toward the other woman. “That was supposed to be strawberry banana. For some reason, it just comes up as strawberry.”

“Got it,” the reply came back.

There was no line behind him, so he continued the conversation while he waited. “This is a great ad,” he said. “Who does the social media for you?”

“I do it,” she said humbly.

“Well, you do a fantastic job. It popped up right when I needed it, and made me want a milkshake. Keep up the good work.” Nothing huge. Just an old guy making banal conversation with a pretty young girl behind the counter. Happens every day.

He thanked her and stepped to the side, still secretly hoping that the mom would appear from somewhere. It never happened, though, and his milkshake appeared on



the serving counter. He fetched it, unwrapped a straw, and gave a quick wave to the daughter as he went back outside.

Disappointed, but not discouraged, he strolled the Boardwalk for a while longer, sipping on an excellent strawberry banana milkshake.

## CHAPTER 21

“Now, it’s my *step*-father that’s the issue? How on Earth did I get so tied up in this?”

Leaning forward onto his elbows at Mayor Ebel’s kitchen table, Scott shook his head. “I have no idea. But if I had to guess, knowing Peter, I would assume that some of the seemingly random things that have happened in your life may not be as random as you might think.”

“What do you mean?”

After following Ebel from the candy shoppe to the beach and surprising him, Scott had teased a conversation that the two of them needed to have. While Peter had reached a level of out-of-control that Scott and Tim had hoped he never would, suddenly he, his friend, and Ebel had aligning interests: all of them wanted to get through and out of this situation with their reputations intact. Peter’s hell-bent intent to continue down this destructive path had forced them all into action. That morning, after seeing the situation spin closer to him than he could allow, he’d called Tim and they’d agreed on two things: (1) it was time for Tim to come clean to his family; and (2) Scott would hunt down the mayor.

On Ebel’s suggestion, the two had agreed to reconnoiter at the mayor’s house. At the suggestion that Peter, with nothing else to do at this point, could be following either of them, Ebel went home directly and Scott followed a circuitous path through the boro’s streets before parking on the road behind the house. The sun had almost set by the time they got there, and he’d used a

gate in Ebel's wooden backyard fence to get into his yard, and the two allies were now camped inside at Ebel's dining room table under a ceiling fan offering dim light, with Scott blowing the mayor's mind with just about everything he was saying.

"You've got a forty-year vendetta against someone who Peter feels ruined his life. That person's step-son happens to be connected to a guy who has all the proof Peter needs to exonerate himself. That kid is all grown up, but he's a nobody. No offense, but he's just a regular guy who goes to work and does his job. Can't really pull any strings to set things in motion, right? So, how do we put that person in a place to be of help?"

Ebel shook his head, still standing after having gotten up to pull another beer from the refrigerator for his unexpected guest. "That's preposterous. There's no way he could've known I'd become—"

"No?" Scott said. "How'd you win your election four years ago?"

"I won the election fair and—"

He nodded, holding up his hand. "I know you earned your victory. Was there any catalyst that pushed you over the top at the end?" Martin didn't respond, probably out of a frustration of realizing he wasn't in charge of his own destiny, so he answered for him. "I know there was. I watched the whole thing happen."

"You're saying that was your friend, Peter?"

"I'm not saying it with one hundred percent certainty. But I'm saying it's a good chance he had something to do with it."

He didn't know if Peter would ever actually admit it. In fact, before a few days ago, Scott wouldn't have considered it at all. He remembered seeing it in the news when Ebel's opponent crumbled in faux controversy as Election Day approached, but had thought nothing of it. Just stupid local politics that he tried his hardest to avoid. He was well aware of who Ebel was, and their hidden but roundabout connection from their past, but he didn't hold the same animosity toward him. He rarely went to Seaside, so the entire affair was nothing more than a mildly interesting anecdote from the news for him.

Until the day that Peter mentioned it to him at the bar – that he intended to involve Ebel in order to set his evil plan in motion. As Scott struggled to put the pieces together, he realized that the events of those final days in the Seaside Heights mayoral campaign had Peter’s stink all over it. Somehow, some way, from wherever he was in the country at the time, he couldn’t shake the idea that his friend had orchestrated things. Marched Ebel right into a role where he could help him finish his work in the sand beneath the Boardwalk.

“If everything you’re saying is true,” Ebel said, “that only leads us to one place: that he’s got everything planned out, and it’s going to happen exactly the way he wants.”

“That’s how it usually has worked for him in his life. His one failure being when your step-father tossed us out of the jewelry store.”

“You were there?”

He nodded. “Oh, yeah. David, who we’d gotten to know somewhat, showed us the flyer and asked us not to come back. He wasn’t threatening. He didn’t have the phone in his hand to turn us in. He just calmly asked us to leave. Which we did. Peter wanted to just move on to another jewelry store, but we assumed that the flyers would have been distributed everywhere, and we were scared. Each of us had lives ahead of us. We all played sports. Had an idea what we wanted to do after high school. Timmy played saxophone, and had a real chance at a future there. None of us were willing to stick our necks out there any more than we already had.”

“But Blythe?”

He took a swig from his beer can. “No, this was everything to him. We encouraged him, if he wanted, to press on, but he refused to do it without us. He didn’t blame us one iota for calling things off. He blamed just one person – for which I’m sorry that you’re forced to be involved. Even today, he wants to drag us into it, though we’ve both encouraged him to stop.”

“Both of us?” Ebel picked up. “There are three of you posing for the photos.”

“Yes, Timmy and I have been in contact about this since it started. He lives up on Connecticut, and is winding up a very successful career, hoping to God that he doesn’t sour it by having to admit to being one quarter of the infamous Seaside Heights pickpocket ring of nineteen seventy-nine.”

Ebel was taking it all in. He offered no facial expression. “And your fourth partner?”

“That’s our friend Randy. Randy sadly passed away from cancer recently. I think that’s what-”

“-that’s what spurred him into action,” Ebel interrupted, nodding. “Okay, I get it. I was wondering, why all of a sudden, now. There’s your reason.” He paused, thinking. “Though, if he was using me as a part of the plan, he was cutting it a little close.”

Scott sighed. “I have to assume he had something else in mind. Randy’s death caught us all off-guard, and he’s taken it very hard. Much of what he’s doing right now, while it was all set up long time ago, is being done in light of his remorse. He feels he let Randy – and the rest of us – down.”

“But, if Randy hadn’t died, would we-” Ebel cut himself off, and leaned back on his breakfast bar, shaking his head. “Wow. There are a lot of levels to this. That’s a lot to carry around for, what, forty years?”

He looked up at him, earnest. “He’s my friend. I wish I could help him, but he’s beyond taking advice or guidance from anyone at this point. All we can do is deal with what he’s going to throw at us, and navigate our own paths.”

Now, Ebel stepped forward and pulled out a chair, sitting across from him. “Okay, how do we do that?”

“Well, you’re the most involved. You probably know his moves better than anyone.”

He rubbed the bridge of his nose. “He wants to use those photos. Those ones of you posing in front of the Boardwalk.”

“I remember them.”

“But I don’t think they’re-”

Scott held up his hands. “My advice, Mayor, is to not try to beat him. He’s a master strategist, who’s made a good living selling crap all around the country, and he’s

been plotting this for forty years. A couple days sitting here brainstorming is not going to give you what you need to outsmart him.”

Ebel stopped, taken aback. “So, how do we approach it?”

“We approach it by assuming that everything we know he wants to happen will happen.”

“Meaning, the court will find in his favor, and give him the stuff.”

He nodded. “Yes. It’s happening. Now, what does that mean for you, and what does it mean for Randy, Tim and me?”

Scott could tell he now had him thinking in the right direction as he watched Ebel contemplate, then reason out loud, “It means I’m embarrassed, and have a personal PR hill to overcome. Because of it, I probably lose the election – which I’m headed towards anyway, but this will be the nail in the coffin. And it means I’ll probably sever a lot of political ties. I mean – they’ll be severed for me. No one wants to be around a fool.”

“You’re being honest with yourself. That’s a good start.”

“What about you?”

“Everyone in this community knows me, and I like to think it’s in a positive way. There’s no way those photos being made public, which will happen, doesn’t lead to Timmy and I being exposed. While there’s no criminal liability-”

Ebel held up his hands, interrupting him, “Something the judge has told me multiple times.”

He paused, wondering where the comment had come from, “While there’s no criminal liability, the last thing I want to do is end what I feel has been a pretty good career by being branded with a juvenile delinquency from long ago. Timmy feels the same way. And we definitely don’t want Randy’s family to have to deal with it, with him not here to answer for himself.”

“I understand that,” Ebel said, nodding along with his story. “Though, in this day and age, you could just write a book about the experience and they’ll make you a celebrity.”

“Just the same...” he said, then changed directions. “So, back to your question about what we do... I don’t have an answer yet. Timmy and I have bounced some ideas around, but we need some things to play out.”

“Well, the judge gave us a week to search through those photos. That rat of an attorney he’s got, Starr, has found a few, but they’re not conclusive, by any stretch of the imagination. I don’t think he’ll call off the chase until they get what they want, but you don’t have long to figure things out.”

“And you?”

Ebel let out a breath. “I think I need to digest what I’ve heard this evening. I’m not a branding guy like you, so that whole public image thing is something I’ll probably need some help with. But I do know politics, and there’s something telling me, with all the crazy connections this situation has created, there’s a way out somewhere.” Scott started to say something, but Ebel cut him off. “Not stopping him, like you said, but a way out.”

He backed off. “Let’s hope so. Can we agree to share whatever intel we can?”

“Within the boundaries of the legal process? Yes. I don’t want to mess anything up on my end by being naïve.”

“Understood.” He pushed the chair back a foot and got to his feet. “I will leave you to it.”

Ebel stood with him and they walked out the door to the backyard, where the mayor escorted him to the wooden gate. “This is silly,” he said, letting Scott out.

“Peter can be a headache, if you let him.”

“Hey – one other thing I thought of... Does your other friend’s family know this is all happening?”

Scott shook his head. “That’s tomorrow. We weren’t sure if we should say something, in hopes that it would all pass, but we decided it was important. I’m headed there in the morning.”

“Good luck with that conversation.”

“Thank you.” He stepped outside the gate. “Mayor, it’s been a pleasure.”

“You too, Scott.”

The gate closed behind him and Scott ambled between the houses behind the mayor’s to the street.

Peering in all directions to make sure he wasn't being watched, he crept to his car, and was on his way home.



## CHAPTER 22

Martin was so lost in thought that he didn't see the Yankees score. Suddenly, they were up 5-3 on the Orioles, and he had no idea how it had happened.

The scoreboard had distracted him from his thinking, which was all over the place – kind of the sporadic flow of ideas and visuals that might happen when you were half-asleep fighting a fever. Only, he wasn't. He was wide awake, sitting on his couch on an otherwise lovely Saturday afternoon, caught between regretting everything that had happened in the past few days and trying to piece together some semblance of a path forward where he comes out with only slight wounds, rather than full political and personal devastation. He wasn't coming up with much, but he would say that his sense of positivity was up a few percentage points after connecting with Scott the realtor the day before.

Neither of them had come up with a solution, and he knew that every day down at the courthouse, Starr was getting closer to finding what he needed. When he did, Martin expected everything would start to quickly flow downhill then. It was a moving target for a time limit for him to come up with a strategy, but it was what he had to work with. The game was supposed to be a distraction, but he knew distraction wasn't the right approach right now. He needed to focus.

That would have to wait as his phone buzzed on the kitchen counter, and he forced himself off the couch to answer it. It was his step-sister, Carrie, which brightened his mood somewhat. It had been a while.

“Hello,” he answered.

“You’re on national news,” she said, without a formal greeting.

“Great. How are they spinning it?”

“They’ve said the word ‘treasure’ a few times, trying to make it look like it’s some big story with pirates and what-not.”

He laughed, despite himself. “I suppose. It *is* gold buried in the sand. Kinda cool, if you’re not me.”

“Why don’t you tell the real story, so I don’t have to get my dirt from CNN? And then tell me why, if you were going through something, I had to call *you*.”

Martin sighed, smiling to himself. Two years older than him, Carrie Alden had always had some influence over him. She’d been a great sister growing up, and they were close – close enough that the “step” moniker always felt misplaced to both of them. He knew other kids whose parents were divorced and remarried who never really connected with their new siblings, and once he was old enough to appreciate his relationship with Carrie, it was very meaningful to him. To this day, while they didn’t talk as much as his mom and step-dad would’ve probably liked, he felt like she was always close, even several states away.

“Well, first of all, the story is changing minute-by-minute, and I’m trying to keep up, myself. If I called you, I probably would’ve just been a blathering fool.”

“You’re alright, though?”

“Ha! Who knows. Depends on your definition of alright.” She didn’t answer that one, so he went on. “Personally, yes. I’m sure somehow I’ll land on my feet. Politically, I’m probably cooked. My confidence in myself? Shot. Friends? People here to support me? I wouldn’t even touch *myself* with a ten-foot pole right now. I’ve been embarrassed publicly. I’m trying to make it through the day without going postal. Other than that, I’m breathing, and I suppose that’s always something to be happy about.”

“So, I should be concerned, but not concerned.”

He laughed. “I suppose that’s the best approach. Talk to me in two days, and everything could be completely different.”

“Let’s hope so. Break it down for me.”

Martin told her the story, and it felt good. He poured all kinds of emotion into it, realizing along the way that he'd bottled up so much to put a positive face on for the community. For everyone else. Even for that rat fink Peter Blythe. From Blythe's initial visit to his office to the dig under the Boardwalk, right up to his conversation with Scott, he filled her in on all the details and his take on everything. He didn't know if he was looking to his big sister to help him with a solution – she had a great mind on her, a former pharmacist who had retired to raise his niece and nephew – or just someone to complain to, but either way, her offering her ear was working.

When he finished, she was silent for a little bit. “You have a take on all this?” he prompted her.

“I don't know. I just have a feeling that a solution will present itself for you.”

He snickered. “The eternal optimist.”

“No, I mean it,” she asserted. “There's a path out of this for you, whether it's remaining as mayor or somewhere else. You've always been a problem solver. It sounds like this guy, the realtor, coming out of the woodwork... He seems like an ally, right? The judge? The way you made it sound, she doesn't want the bad guys to win here. I know it seems kind of hopeless, but I think if you do an inventory on what you have going for you, something will come clear.”

“I suppose I could take a more proactive approach, instead of just letting things come to me.”

“Or, take the things that just come to you, but be more positive about it.”

“How do you mean?”

“You said yourself, things are changing minute-by-minute. Look at every new thing as an opportunity.” He started to answer, but she kept going. “You said this guy's been plotting for forty years. He sounds like he's pretty sharp. But he can't possibly have planned for every contingency. Right?”

“No, I guess not.”

“You didn't get where you are by being a dolt.”

He scoffed. “I got where I am because of him.”

“You have no proof of that.”

“You're right,” he sighed. “Overactive imagination.”

She signed off the call with a promise to give his situation some more thought, and help where she could. He told her he appreciated the conversation, and would keep her more up-to-date as things went forward than he had so far.

Hanging up the phone, he afforded himself a deep breath and set the phone on the counter, where it immediately buzzed again. The caller ID came up as Scott Belanger, but while he did want to hear what his new friend – ally, as Carrie had called him – had to say, he needed a cool down from reliving the story with her, and let it go to voicemail. He'd call him back later.

Flopping back onto the couch, he saw the Yankees had put two more on the board, and were up 7-3 now.

\*\*\*

Tim hung up the phone with his heart in his throat. He'd procrastinated long enough.

Scott talking with Randy's wife, which he'd just let him know had happened, he had to imagine was easier than what he had to now do. The crew's responsibility to Shelley was important, yes, but not to the level of Tim's responsibility to his own family. This was going to blindside them, and he wasn't sure how it was going to go.

His friend's report was that Shelley had taken the news in stride. Randy's involvement in the infamous pickpocket ring of 1979 at this point was merely a story they could tell, as Randy wasn't around to tell his side, or give his perspective on it. Scott said she'd listened, asked a few questions, then told him that she didn't want anything to do with the stuff sitting in the vault at the bank, or any proceeds that might come from it. That chapter was closed, and she would move on – and hoped that Scott, Tim and even Peter would do the same. Scott had then called Mayor Ebel and left a voicemail for him before filling Tim in.

One of Tim's sons, Jamie, who lived close by, happened to be over for the afternoon to steal food out of their refrigerator, which Cheri always poked fun at, but loved every minute of it. David, the older of the two kids,

lived in Boston, and Tim had had Cheri hunt him down for a video call, not telling her why. He called it a “family meeting” – something they hadn’t done since the boys had been in their pre-teens.

He made his way from their front porch, where he’d taken Scott’s call, back to the Florida room. Cheri and the boys were chatting while they waited for him, and he walked in on them talking about David’s recent date, with a woman he’d met at a work happy hour.

“I can see it in your eyes,” Jamie said, pointing at their iPad and David’s face. “She’s the one and you already know it.”

On screen, their oldest son held up his hands. “Hold on. We’ve had one date.”

“But you’re not denying it.” Jamie looked up at his dad, shoving the remaining half of a peanut butter and jelly sandwich in his mouth. “He’s not denying it.”

Tim smiled and shrugged. Beneath the surface, his heart was pounding, and sweat was collecting underneath his shirt collar. He couldn’t believe it. He’d presented news, both good and bad, to shareholders over time, and had never been so nervous.

“What did you want to talk about Dad?” David asked, trying to change the subject.

“Wait a second,” Jamie jumped in. “We’re not done with-”

“What is it, Honey?” Cheri asked, noting his demeanor. The boys sensed the seriousness of the situation and clammed up for him to talk.

He took a deep breath and positioned himself between Cheri and Jamie, and in view of David on the video call. “There’s something I need to discuss with all of you. It’s... Awkward.”

“What’s going on?” Cheri asked, her voice and face full of concern.

Tim realized he’d built it up too much, and they now expected something horrible. He reached out and touched her shoulder. “No, please,” he said. “Nothing tragic. Just something from my past that I never told to any of you, and it’s time to fill you in.”

They were mesmerized, waiting to hear what he had to say.

“I don’t know if you’ve seen on the news, but a few days ago, they found some gold items buried in the sand on the Jersey Shore?”

Cheri shook her head, but the boys knew. “Yeah, I saw that,” Jamie said, laughing. He started singing The Drifters’ “Under the Boardwalk,” but stopped almost immediately, noticing that no one was joining him in the frivolity. “Sorry. That’s the song they keep playing...”

“So, you know? David?” Onscreen, David nodded, so he turned to Cheri. “Hon, last week they unearthed a cache of stolen gold from underneath the Boardwalk in Seaside Heights.”

“Near where you grew up?”

“Yes. Apparently, there’s a big legal battle going on right now about who owns the items. The town says since they did the digging, the entire thing belongs to them. But... A man has come forward saying he has proof that the items belong to him.”

“What does this have to do with anything?”

He paused, enough for them to realize he was connected somehow.

“You know how it got there,” Jamie said.

Tim looked up at him. “I do.”

“You weren’t one of the pickpockets, were you?” his youngest son’s eyes widened. “You were.”

“Pickpockets?” Cheri asked.

He let out a breath “Back when I was a teenager, some friends and I did some bad stuff. We spent a summer... essentially, terrorizing, people on the Boardwalk in Seaside Heights. It was awful and terrible and bad. And I thought it was all behind me.”

“Your friends?” He tried to read disdain in his wife’s voice. “Who?”

He’d been hoping that wasn’t the first question she asked. “All of us. Scott. Peter... Randy.”

“You guys have kept this secret for, what? Forty years?”

“About that, yes,” he admitted, nodding.

David spoke from the screen. “Why is this coming out now, Dad?”

“It’s Peter,” he said. “Peter had made a promise that summer that he would, I don’t know, fix everything.”

Everything that went wrong for us. Or, everything he perceived had gone wrong. But, he never went back until it was too late.”

“Meaning, Uncle Randy died,” Jamie said. The kids had grown up calling their dad’s childhood friend, “Uncle.”

“Yes.”

Everyone was silent for a moment, taking everything in, until Jamie spoke again, “I can’t believe you were a pickpocket. How’d you go from that to respectable businessman, Mister Vice President?” Tim looked at him. Was he actually proud of him because of this?

“It was a long road.” He looked to Cheri. “Tell me you’re not mad about this.”

She was perplexed, in fact. “I don’t know what to say. What does this mean for you? What does it mean for our family?”

“Well, as the boys know, our names have not been attached to anything. Which we’re doing everything we can to keep it that way. Peter took the lead, and it’s his baby, which is fine with us. He says that if he’s successful, he wants to split the proceeds. Scott and I have told him that we don’t want anything to do with it.”

“Wait,” David said, “can you get into trouble? I saw some of the video of them pulling the stuff out of the sand. There was a lot there.”

He shook his head before he finished asking. “No. At least not legally. The statute of limitations ended a long time ago. But, in the public eye, definitely, if our names get out, it would not be good.”

“So, I don’t have to worry about the police showing up at our door?” Cheri asked.

“No, we’re good there.”

Again, there was a long silence. Tim knew they’d have more questions – the boys’ more inquisitive: Why did they stop? What was it like, being a criminal? Cheri’s interrogation would come later, with Jamie and David not around. Her questions would surround the impact of all of it on their lives.

“So, what happens next?” David asked.

“Scott and I are working on a plan. As of right now, Peter believes he can get done what he needs to get done

without having any of us be known. Let's hope he's right. We also find ourselves in a position to be helpful to the mayor in Seaside, as he's trying to get himself out of a difficult situation. That's going to be important."

"And if Peter's wrong?" Cheri asked.

"Well, then, we go to Plan B."

"Which is?"

"In that case, we won't be able to distance ourselves from what happened," he said. "But, we can distance ourselves from what Peter's trying to accomplish. Scott and I agree, that's our best bet." He paused. "I'm sorry, to all of you, that I never told you this before. Like I said, I thought it was a chapter of my life that was completely closed. I suppose you can never just count on something like that."

"It's alright, Dad," Jamie said, "but I have a question for you..."

"Anything."

"Can you teach me how to do that?"

"Jamie!" Cheri reprimanded him.

He held up his hands. "No, no, no... I'm not going to embark on a life of crime like my father, here. It'd just be cool at a party." He grabbed Tim's wrist. "You know, how they slip someone's watch off, and then show it to them, like a magic trick. That's all. Teach me some basic stuff."

"I've gotta jump," David said.

"Alright, Honey," Cheri blew him a kiss. "Let us know how date number two goes." The screen went off and she looked at Tim. "Don't teach him anything."

Now, he laughed. It had gone better than he'd thought it could. And it would stay that way unless Peter for some reason released their names. Unfortunately, as things got more tense between all of them, there was no guarantee that he wouldn't do just that.

Cheri retreated to the kitchen.

"C'mon, Dad. Just one little thing?" Jamie said, standing and facing him, gleeful at the opportunity.

He shook his head. "No. You'd simply be too powerful."



Jamie waved his hand at him and taunted him, “I gotta say, I don’t know if I believe your little story, if you can’t prove it.”

“Well, I imagine you’d like your watch back,” he said, tossing his youngest son his own timepiece from his wrist and leaving him agape in the middle of the room.

## CHAPTER 23

Martin winced and hung up the phone. Abigail was super talented and was going to go a long way from here, but because she'd taken a role that wasn't exactly suited for her, some of the executive assistant tasks he needed from her weren't her forte.

He understood, of course. When you're an executive assistant and the governor's chief-of-staff calls after a number of terrible things have happened in the days prior to the call, you would calmly let her know the mayor is occupied, and you'll hunt him down the minute he's available. Especially on a Monday morning, when your boss is on his last political legs and pretty much ready to hurl himself into the Atlantic. Consequently, when you're a rising star in the party and the governor's chief-of-staff calls, you swoon and do everything you can to help.

Which was how Martin ended up unexpectedly being reamed out by the governor's office for the last twenty minutes – a fine way to start his day in the midst of everything else that was going on. In truth, he wasn't sure what he was being chastised for. More that the governor said, "Make this guy pay" for putting her into an embarrassing situation, and the order was carried out. The call didn't appear to accomplish anything, other than heaping more onto his shoulders.

He sat back in his desk chair for a moment, forgetting what he'd been doing before the call had come in, and letting out a huge breath. He was so beaten right now by everything, his mind going in so many different

directions, that he didn't even have an emotional reaction to give.

After a moment, he stood and went to the main door to his office, poking his head out. Abigail caught sight of him and turned his direction.

"Abby, on a call like that," he said, "if you could, please just give me a heads up. I'd probably like a few minutes to gather my thoughts before talking to them. Okay?"

She nodded. "I just thought... The governor..."

"I know. It makes sense. But let's just establish that protocol. Get the number. Tell them you'll find me, and then let me know so I can call back. Good?"

"You've got it." She swung her chair back to her computer and resumed what she was working on.

Rather than turn back into his office, Martin closed the door behind him and headed out into the hallway to use the restroom, mostly to clear his head for a moment. He said hello to a number of boro employees and Councilwoman Melanie Peterson as he passed them, then slid into privacy.

When he emerged back into the hallway, Abigail was standing there, at attention, waiting for him, a strange look on his face. Concern? Worry?

"What's up?" he asked.

"You have a visitor."

"Okay?" He started to walk, but she stopped him.

"I wanted you to know before you went back into the office."

He turned toward her, holding out his hands. "Who is it?"

"Vincent Scazzafava."

The name immediately rang a bell, and he searched his memory for why. It came quickly, and he repeated it. "Vincent Scazzafava? Who? The son?" She shook her head slowly and his eyes widened. "The dad? *The* Vincent Scazzafava? What's he doing here?"

"He didn't say. Just asked to see you."

Now, his heart was pounding. Vincent Scazzafava was a world-renown Jersey City mob boss. At least, lore would say that was the case. As the telling went, Scazzafava had built an empire in Jersey City in the 1960s that controlled many facets of society in the area – construction, ports,

police, unions. Dozens of murders were attributed to his organization, including, if Martin remembered correctly, a city attorney who was investigating him. While he was out of the limelight now, and had been for years, his son, Vincent “Vinny” Jr., had to some degree taken up his mantle, and ran one of the big unions in North Jersey. But, Scazzafava’s was one of those tailor-made-for-Hollywood stories, where although everyone knew what was going on, he was never convicted of anything. In fact, the movie *Bottom of the Hudson* had been loosely based on Scazzafava’s legend, though Martin hadn’t seen it. Wasn’t his kind of film. Though right there in the hallway outside the bathroom, he wished he had.

“What is he? He’s got to be like eighty?”

She nodded. “He’s older.”

“Do you know anything about him?”

“I mean, I saw the movie. I don’t know anything really beyond that.”

He was stalling. Mainly because he had no idea what any of it meant. “Just him?”

“He has a driver outside, but he came in alone.”

He huffed. “Yeah. A driver.” She didn’t respond to his joke, equally as curious as he was at what he was going to do. “Alright, let’s go.”

On the short walk to his office, he contemplated the proper etiquette for interacting with someone of Scazzafava’s reputation. Realistically, he should treat him as any other visitor coming into his office, but he knew he wouldn’t be able to do that, given his pounding heart and shortness of breath. Was there a deference he should show, or should he be matter-of-fact? Would he want special treatment, or would he resent special treatment? If Martin had wanted a couple minutes to strategize his call with the governor’s office – which now seemed unbelievably unimportant – he figured he’d need about three weeks to prep for this meeting.

Eventually, he ran out of floor space and his office door approached. He took a breath and ducked inside, Abigail behind him.

Standing, not sitting, was an elderly, dark-skinned Italian man who was a fraction of the person that Martin

had read about and seen pictures of over the years. Physically, that was – he was smaller, thinner and frailer, and leaned over on an elegant cane that Martin couldn't escape thinking had at some point bludgeoned someone. He shook the thought from his head, though, because while the new version of Scazzafava was certainly less imposing, his presence was the opposite. Martin had never been in a room with an alleged mob boss, but his aura made the air in the room thick. This was a man who held considerable power and from the purposeful look in his eyes to the non-committal pose of his jaw, he was there for a reason, and Martin would bet money that he would be leaving with results.

Martin spoke first. "Mister Scazzafava, it's a pleasure to meet you."

He extended his hand. Scazzafava reached out and feebly grabbed three of Martin's fingers with a quick up-and-down shake, then without a word motioned with his head toward the inner office. Martin moved over and opened the door while his guest hobbled inside via his cane and took one of the seats facing the desk. Martin swung around the desk to his own seat.

Scazzafava had leaned his cane on Martin's desk and was looking around the room. "You're a mayor," he spoke for the first time. "You need some nicer furniture."

The tangent caught him off-guard, which actually helped him relieve his nerves for a second, and he smiled, joining him in scanning the room. "Well, I'm a mayor of a tiny town. We don't have the budget-

He waved his hand. "I'll send something over."

"Oh, I don't know if-

"I'll send something over." End of story.

"How can I help you, Mister Scazzafava?"

"I'd like to see the jewelry that you pulled out of the sand."

While Martin should have seen that coming, he hadn't. Why else would he be there? To talk about furniture? Three things immediately came to mind: One, he wanted desperately to do what the man wanted, though he wasn't sure why; two, the items were not in his control, so he really couldn't; and three, did Scazzafava's

appearance in his office that morning offer some kind of opportunity?

“You had something stolen,” he said, as empathetically as possible.

“I did.”

Martin waited, but he offered no other details, so he nervously shuffled the papers that he was working on before the call from the governor’s office. “Well, I will do what I can help you, but I don’t have the jewelry here. It’s at the bank, and we’d have to get the court to allow-”

He held up his hand again. “It’s all taken care of.”

“What is? The court?”

Scazzafava stood and collected his cane, turning to the door. “They’ll meet us there.”

Martin stammered in confusion for a moment before rising, himself, then rushing to beat the old man to the door and open it for him, which he did successfully. Not sure what was happening, he let his guest take the lead. Inching along using his cane for support, Scazzafava led him out of the building to where a shiny black Cadillac sat, a 30-something old country Italian man dressed in khakis and an untucked polo shirt held the door open. Martin was directed to the back seat while Scazzafava sat in the passenger seat. Once his driver returned to his spot behind the wheel, they pulled away.

“This is Anthony,” Scazzafava said without turning.

“Hello,” Martin called from the back seat.

The car was exceptionally smooth, but Martin was too nervous to appreciate it, much less the soft leather seats and interior. He continued to wait for more explanation as to what they were up to, but got none. From the back seat, he studied both Scazzafava and his driver, trying to read what he could. But they offered nothing.

With the bank only blocks away, the trip was short, and before he knew it Anthony was pulling open his door. He stepped out and stood to the side while Scazzafava was helped out of the car and handed his cane. With a nod of his head, he motioned Martin to the front door of the bank.

Martin stopped him for a moment. “Mister Scazzafava, I’m confused. If you had this all worked out, why did you need me?”

He continued toward the single door entrance to the small Seaside Heights bank branch. “You’re the only one I trust,” he said, again not turning to look at him.

After a hesitation, Martin jumped ahead of him again and pulled open the door, and they entered the bank. The branch was probably the smallest in the Jersey Shore Savings Bank network, opening just a couple years back to serve the small community’s needs – Martin had attended the ribbon cutting, calling it “a great day for Seaside Heights,” the way mayors will often do. There were just two tellers and one office, the occupant of which was poised at the door to the side of the counter, ready to greet them.

“Mister Scazzafava,” Gary Slater, the bank’s branch manager, fawned. Martin knew Slater from many interactions, and winced, hoping that he wasn’t being so obvious in his kowtowing, himself. “Welcome to Jersey Shore Savings. It’s a pleasure to have you. If you’d like to follow me this way...”

Slater opened the door leading them back to the vault where Blythe’s stash of stolen items had been stored since being removed from the sand, though they diverted into a small room with a conference table. On the table were the array of security bags the bank had been holding, and surrounding it were Starr, Grey and Rob Little, Judge Petrelli’s clerk. Little was in the process of removing items from the bags and aligning them on the table.

Everyone stopped and looked up as they entered the room, Scazzafava becoming the center of attention. An awkward silence took over for a moment, and Martin noticed that the old man was scanning the table.

“Mister Scazza-“ Grey started to say, but was interrupted when he inched forward with his cane.

They all watched in amazement as he took two steps to the table, then reached out and snatched one of about a dozen gold watches that Little had already removed from the bag and shoved it into his inner coat pocket.

“I’m sorry-“ Starr started to step forward, but both Scazzafava and Martin glared at him. He took a breath and

regrouped. “Mister Scazzafava, I’m afraid these items are all under the jurisdiction of the court, and in order for you to have access to anything, you’ll have to have proof that it’s yours.”

Bold, Martin thought, but the old man leaned his cane on the table, and turned to Starr. Martin watched as he rolled up his left sleeve, showing his current gold watch, and unlatched it from his arm.

“In June of nineteen seventy-nine,” he said, an airy, nostalgic quality to his voice that Martin was hearing for the first time, “I brought my children to the Boardwalk for a day. They loved the bowling game, with the circles... Skee-ball. Couldn’t get enough Skee-ball. ‘Daddy, can we play Skee-ball?’ My son, Vinnie, he’s five or six. He bowls one up, and it doesn’t make it all the way. It rolls back past him and onto the floor. When I go to pick up the ball for him, these kids are running through the arcade, and one smacks into me. I fall down. So does he. He seems like a good kid. A little rambunctious. He helps me up, says he’s sorry, and leaves. I go back and give the ball to my boy, Vinnie. Later that night, I realize my watch is gone.”

Now, without the cane, he ambled over closer to where Starr and Little were standing, and held out the watch he’d taken off of his wrist. “This watch I bought the week after that. Only this one,” he turned it over, “I had engraved with a skull and crossbones. Like a pirate, right? It’s because if I ever find the person who stole my watch – it was a gift from my Uncle Giuseppe, who died in Naples – if I ever find the person who stole my watch, that’s what’s waiting for him.”

Martin leaned in to see the engraving, and a shiver went down his spine. How was Starr supposed to react to what Scazzafava just said, knowing his client was the face of the pickpocket ring?

Scazzafava dug back into his coat pocket and produced the watch he’d identified on the table. It was identical to the one he was holding out for Starr. Minus, of course, the accompanying promise of death to those who’d crossed him.



“Proof enough?” he asked. His tone was clear to everyone that it was the last thing he’d be saying on the topic.

Starr deflected, looking to Little, who Martin thought looked surprisingly calm and professional. The young man looked at Scazzafava. “I believe Judge Petrelli would agree that this is sufficient.”

Scazzafava nodded his thanks, then turned, grabbed his cane and walked out of the room. Martin made eye contact with his attorney, who made a “wow” face at him, and then left without addressing any of the others, all who stood motionless, stymied by what had just happened.

He hustled back to get the main door for Scazzafava, who then continued his trek to the car where Anthony waited.

“Did you get it?” the younger man asked. Scazzafava nodded, drawing a big smile from Anthony. “Uncle Joe will be happy.”

The old man touched his lips and pointed skyward, then got into the car with Anthony’s help. Martin wasn’t sure if he was being given a ride back to the office, but the young man opened the door for him. “Mister Mayor.”

He nodded and got in. A moment later, they were driving back toward Boro Hall in silence.

They were just about there when Scazzafava spoke for the first time, still facing front. “Mayor, I’ll send over that furniture.”

Martin started to retort, but knew better. “Thank you. It’s very much appreciated.”

“You can help me, too,” he said, struggling to turn to see him as Anthony pulled the car up to the curb in front of Boro Hall.

“What can I do?” he walked right into it blindly.

“If you’d be good enough to put me in touch with Peter Blythe.”

## CHAPTER 24

“I don’t care who he is, Your Honor,” Starr ranted. “We can’t have random people just coming in here and claiming things. We’re not done going over the evidence yet. At the very least, we need to let the process play out.”

Petrelli was nodding, leaning against a sill at the bottom of the Ocean County Courthouse’s large windows lining the main hallway. Starr had put in a call immediately to the judge’s office after leaving the bank. Then, he’d called Peter, who stood next to him, with Grey, as well. People were walking past doing the court’s daily business, but Petrelli had offered them only a few minutes to talk to her during an afternoon break from the bench. And that, she said, only because of the shock value of what had happened that morning.

“Mister Starr, while the statute of limitations has long ago expired on any criminal aspect of this case, the point remains that the items in the cache were stolen goods – Mister Blythe has admitted that, himself, in his lawsuit. As such, we will treat those items as though they are stolen goods. Which means, if a person can meet the burden of proof, then the items must be returned to their rightful owners.”

“Had it been Joe Schmoe from off the street-”

“Are you sure you want to go there, councilor?”

Starr shut up. On that topic, at least. “Your Honor, what’s to say that people don’t start showing up with

doctored photos trying to demonstrate their ownership of lost items?”

“If that happens, we’ll take those instances one at a time,” she said.

“I hardly think we’ll be inundated with legitimate requests,” Grey weighed in.

Starr held his hands out. “The boro has already received hundreds of claims. Maybe a thousand.”

“That’s why I said legitimate requests.”

Peter wanted to weigh in, but he knew Starr wanted him to keep quiet.

“And your office has the capacity to go through all of those claims?”

Grey shook her head. “Of course we don’t. But we know they’re not real, so we don’t need to. If someone shows up with an actual-”

“Look,” Petrelli said, standing up from her inclined position, “here’s the way it is. If anyone shows up with proof that they were a victim of Mister Blythe’s pickpocket ring in the summer of nineteen seventy-nine, then we will give them a thorough analysis to determine the truth. But, and let me remind you, Mister Starr, the public has not seen the collection of items. For someone to even attempt to bring proof, it’s a pretty good bet that they have good standing to do so. There’s no need to broadcast what will be in the collection. The truth will come out.”

Peter could tell that Starr had more to say, but stopped. “Thank you, Your Honor,” he said, instead.

Petrelli looked to Grey. “Good?”

“We didn’t steal the stuff in the first place, Your Honor,” she said, taking a shot.

Petrelli smirked and shook her head, then turned back to her courtroom, her robe flowing behind her as she walked. A moment later, she disappeared behind the large wooden doors of justice.

“Honestly?” Starr said. “We didn’t steal the stuff?”

“You’ve got bigger fish to fry,” Grey said, looking at Peter.

“Yes, what’s that?”

She huffed incredulously. “Well, not to put too fine a point on it, your client pissed off a mob boss, who’s been

carrying around his frustration for forty years. I wouldn't want that hanging over my head."

"Hazard of living a life of crime in New Jersey in the seventies, huh?" Peter laughed it off.

"No," Starr said, "I think this is serious. We should have you take precautions."

Peter looked at both of them, side-to-side. "Wait? You're serious?"

"Yes, I think it'd be a good time for you to get out of town. I can talk to the judge—"

"What, like witness protection?"

"Well not quite anything so dramatic, but let's do what we can so you're not an easy target."

He looked to Grey. "He's for real?"

"The watch was a gift from his deceased uncle," she said. "You put two-and-two together..."

Peter's breath left him. That wasn't part of the plan. His mind flooded with thoughts of where in the country he could even hide. He'd been everywhere, so finding a place where he knew the local environment wouldn't be difficult. But could it possibly be good enough? Something occurred to him, and he looked up at them. "What about Scott and Tim?"

"Your partners?" Grey asked, to which he nodded. "There were three others in the picture."

"Randy passed away," he muttered.

She turned to Starr. "Given this latest development, maybe he was the lucky one."

"Hey, c'mon!" Peter stammered.

Starr put his hands out to separate them before the conversation turned into anything. "Enough," he said. "Look, the public has not seen the photos, and there's no need for them to. As of right now, they're safe, and we'd like to keep them that way. Agreed?"

Peter was nodding. "Yes, definitely."

"Naomi?"

"Of course, we want to keep people safe," she deadpanned.

They both looked at her for a moment in silence, then Starr said, "We done here?"

“We are. Mister Blythe,” she acknowledged him with a nod of her head, then left down the hallway, the sound of her heels clicking the floor diminishing until she reached the doors and disappeared.

He turned to Starr. “What now?”

“Well, she just saw your emotion over protecting your friends,” he said, thinking. “My guess is they’ll start to put pressure on the judge to release the photos to the public to get you to drop the case.”

He sighed. “Yes, I can see that happening.”

“And, what would your response be?”

Turning to look out the window at the grassy courtyard outside, he shook his head. “I’m not sure.”

“Well, you’d better think about it. If they see an opening, they won’t delay.”

“You think I should leave town?”

“I do.”

He couldn’t envision how he could pursue the claim to victory from somewhere else, particularly with the story already in the media. There would be questions as to where he was and why. His plan had been in motion for forty-plus years and, while he’d considered that people might come out of the woodwork to make their own claims on the items they’d stolen, he’d never considered that any specific individual of significance would be a part of that. He was at the same time aggravated and disappointed in himself.

But was he afraid? He certainly wanted Starr and everyone else to believe that was his driving emotion at the moment. Who wouldn’t be terrified that a mob boss with a couple dozen murders allegedly under his belt had set sights on them? But he was so hyper-focused on getting this done, fulfilling the promise he made to his friends, especially Randy, so many years ago, that in truth even the prospect of having his name on such a list was a blip on the radar for him. He wanted to win.

“Alright,” he said, nodding. “But I’m coming back if it means the difference between winning and losing.”

Starr sighed, and Peter saw something in his eyes he hadn’t expected: sympathy. The man was emotionless, but for some reason, he thought there was something wrong with his client’s state-of-mind.

“Agree to disagree,” he said, addressing the look on his face, even if nothing was spoken. “I’ll call and let you know where I end up.”

He exited the building, retreated to his car and headed to the hotel to pack up his things.

## CHAPTER 25

In all the hub-bub surrounding the discovery of gold in the sand at Seaside Heights beach, Martin had forgotten he was running an actual campaign for mayor. It hadn't been until he was drifting off to sleep the night before that it had popped into his mind that he had his regularly monthly campaign meeting scheduled for the morning. It then took him an hour to fall asleep, as he wondered who would show up, since he'd sent out no reminders.

That hour turned into another after a winning idea hit him, one that he'd prepped for the meeting.

In the end, he had a decent showing – five of his volunteers were present, including Connie, a new member of the team, who he'd e-mailed first thing in the morning to see if she could by chance make it. She did, and he was glad to have her there. Over the last week, she'd become, perhaps, the most integral person on the team, counseling him almost daily now on the situation that had been created by Peter Blythe's arrival – something he was about to bring the rest of the team in on.

Martin had worked, during his time in the political trenches as a staff member, on much bigger campaigns, and had tried, with his own campaign, to bring in some of the science of engaging and activating volunteers. But, a local campaign where only about 400 people vote in total, is very different from a state legislative district serving a couple hundred thousand. So, while he worked to keep things serious, he didn't overdo it. The meetings were not

often, and while he did ask things of his volunteers to be completed, they generally weren't particularly cumbersome activities. The group was more a resource to bounce ideas off of, and he'd put together a good team. No one had jumped ship, even with him down in the polls.

His agenda that morning, though, distributed across the large corner table of the Ocean Queen Diner in Toms River, had been interrupted by the presentation of a postcard one of the volunteers, Andy Kenefick, had received the day before – an invite to a fundraiser for Martin's opponent, Melinda Sanderson-Cox.

He read aloud to the table, "Ebel's haphazard approach to running our government continues to threaten the strength of our community. It's time for new leadership. Melinda Sanderson-Cox has the residents and businesses of Seaside Heights as her top priority. Ebel's digging in the sand looking for fame." He looked up to the faces around the table to find horror, as they waited for his response. He went another way, laughing. "Wow. She sure took advantage of the situation."

Those around the table nervously softened. In addition to Connie were Kenefick, a young dad who'd inherited a beach house from his parents and who Martin had helped with some code-related updates he'd needed to make upon taking ownership; Toni Gervase, whose family owned one of the Jet-Ski rental places on the intercoastal side of the island; Pat Burachek, a longtime homeowner who'd in the past several years purchased a number of houses that he was renting via Airbnb; and Councilman Davis Jamieson, who was still sticking by him – something Martin very much appreciated.

"When's the fundraiser?" Jamieson asked.

Martin glanced back down at the card. "September seventeenth."

"So, we have to get one scheduled for you around then, too."

He nodded. "Yes," he said, slowly, "But... What I'm seeing here is a bit of a deadline."

"A deadline for what?" Gervase asked.

After handing the postcard back across the table to Kenefick, he looked around at everyone, one-by-one, then



let out a deep breath. “Let me get back to the agenda, part of which was to bring you all in on what’s happened over the past week or so. I apologize for my lack of communication, but there have been many moving parts that I’ve been trying to keep up with.”

He had their attention, so he started to continue, but their server, a soft-skinned twenty-something with her black hair pulled back into a long ponytail, arrived, and started placing breakfast entrees in front of them. Martin paused while this happened, then when she’d left and they all looked back to him with great interest, he held out his hand, instructing them to eat. He, himself, stabbed at his over easy eggs, releasing the yolk, and dabbed a buttery English muffin in, taking a bite.

He set the muffin down, finished chewing, and continued as the others dug in. “I’m sure by this point, you’ve seen some of what is happening on the news. Most of it is accurate, so I won’t take up too much time with it. It’s been confirmed that Mister Blythe and his team were connected with an infamous band of pickpockets that were prevalent on the Seaside Heights Boardwalk in the summer of nineteen seventy-nine.” He saw Burachek start to say something and stopped him. “No, don’t worry about it – the statute of limitations has long since run out. We’ve already tried that. Right now, it’s all about the claim. We are now in court, and the evidence that they’re using to make their claim on the items we pulled from the ground are photos taken by my father in the nineteen seventies.”

He paused for a moment to watch their reactions. Also, with the knowledge that he was probably in a bit of a gray area as to what he should be telling anyone not immediately associated with the case. Naomi had filled him in on a conversation she, Starr and Blythe had had with the judge the afternoon before, and some new things had come to light, including the impetus for his new idea to fix the situation and win the election.

“Your father?” Jamieson asked. “Those photos that you have sitting on your bookcase?”

“Well, they’re not there anymore. They’re down at the courthouse.”

“How could they have known what was in them?”

He held up his hands. "That's a long story that I'll tell you offline. Don't want to waste time here, but let's just say... They know what's in them."

"And?" Burachek led him to his next point.

"They haven't found concrete proof yet, but I'm guessing if they knew where to look, they know that what they need is there." He could see Connie nodding out of the corner of his eye. "So, that's where we are today. Here's where we need to go tomorrow..."

He enjoyed another bite of eggy English muffin, and a piece of bacon, then continued, "Yesterday, a person who'd had something stolen showed up with proof, and after he'd identified it, the judge allowed him to walk out with his stolen item. I was kind of amazed, but it happened, and then she told us that anyone else who can provide concrete evidence that items in the collection belonged to them prior to the summer of nineteen seventy-nine, they can take them. This is where our opportunity lies."

"That was forty years ago," Kenefick said, looking to the others for support for his take. "A lot of those people are probably dead."

"Maybe," Martin said, "but if we can minimize the take that the pickpockets get by taking on the hero's role of returning stolen property to individuals and families, that can only be good for Seaside Heights, and good for our re-election efforts."

Jamieson was grinning. "I like it. It makes a lot of sense. The media's already done the work of getting the story out there. Now, we just need to separate the real people from all of those fake requests that came in last week."

"... And are still coming in," Martin added. "We need to get the word out about a process. How people with legitimate claims can get through that noise."

"How's that?" Gervase asked.

"I'd have to think photos, receipts..."

"Insurance?" Kenefick added.

"Yes, insurance. I'm sure there's lots of ways. They just have to be ways that please the court."

“So, when you said ‘deadline,’ for Melinda’s fundraiser,” Kenefick said, picking up the card, “you meant we need to have this all going by then.”

“Not just going,” Martin said, grinning. “I want every piece in that collection accounted for by then. Maybe a couple left, just to make the whole ordeal look pathetic. Then, we put out a statement about Melinda’s approach to government, which is just to point fingers at a problem, rather than doing something about it.” He’d come up with that on the drive to the meeting.

“How do you get the word out, though?” Connie spoke for the first time.

“Well, that’s where you come in.”

“Me?!”

He laughed. “Not you, specifically, but I’m wondering if your daughter might be open to a side gig.”

Her eyes showed confusion for a moment, but then she realized where he was headed. “I don’t know, Martin...”

“Can we at least ask her? She’ll be paid by the boro. We have a marketing budget. We just need someone who knows what they’re doing, and we need that person today.” She was clearly uncomfortable, and didn’t answer right away, so Martin turned to the group. “Connie’s daughter Laura is a whiz with social media. My thought is that we put out a message on the various platforms far and wide, and take advantage of the current press we’re getting. Anyone who searches for Seaside Heights, pickpocketing and jewelry gets an ad outlining the steps they’d need to take to secure their items. We can hire a marketing firm to do it, but honestly, I trust a college student who knows what they’re doing more. Plus, I’d like to keep it a little more controlled.” He looked back to Connie. “What do you think?”

She nodded. “She’s old enough to make the decision herself, so I won’t answer for her. You can ask her yourself. She’ll be at the shop this afternoon.”

Now, he felt bad about putting her on the spot in front of everyone. His enthusiasm over the idea had gotten the best of him. It would be important for him to address it with her privately later. Very important, he realized.

For now, though, he simply nodded and mouthed, "Thank you." He looked to Jamieson, who had a confused look on his face. "Davis?"

He shook his head. "I'm good. I like the idea. I'm just thinking about logistics. Will people have to come here? Do we have the budget to send things to people if they can't? It's stuff we can work out, but I think you're on the right path."

"You're right," he said, appreciating the input. It told him the idea, itself, had merit. "I think some of that will be left up to the court. But we should be ready with solutions." He stopped, smiled and looked at everyone. "How's breakfast?" Everyone grunted or nodded their approval. "Alright, let's move on to the rest of the agenda. Mailings... We have budget for two community-wide mailings, and if we do a fundraiser in September, we can add a third...."

The group continued their breakfast and the agenda with an energy they hadn't anticipated when they'd arrived.

## CHAPTER 26

As Peter drove across the state line into Kentucky over what the sign said was the Big Sandy River, his perspective on the whole situation changed yet again. For the first time since he'd left the Jersey Shore, his hometown, he was okay with whatever might happen.

He hadn't headed this direction at first. In fact, he hadn't headed anywhere intentionally. When your attorney tells you it'd be safer for you to be out of town, you simply get in the car and start driving. He'd originally headed south, and it wasn't until he was almost to Richmond along I-95 that he started to think about where he might end up. He'd always liked Northern Kentucky, so he veered that direction onto I-64 and had been lost in his thoughts since.

Peter was too cocky to accept fear over any impending consequence for his actions, though he knew it was there. As much as he despised himself for it, at each rest area, every roadside fast food joint he stopped at, he found himself looking over his shoulder. Through a stroke of bad luck, he was caught up in a Hollywood-style chase that was far bigger than anything he'd ever imagined. The people he and his squad stole from 40 years before were faceless, anonymous. Ebel had changed that. Suddenly, they were very real. None of it was ever meant to hurt anyone personally – they never thought about it that way, which is why he'd never felt guilty about any of it. If he could stand in front of Vincent Scazzafava, he would apologize to him and plead for his forgiveness, sure. But, the reality was, if Starr was accurate in his assessment, that

opportunity might not be afforded to him, should the confrontation ever materialize. He could hope, though.

In between those random stops, though, there was an indignance. Frig him. He should've been more careful. An important guy like that, letting a teenager get the best of him. As Peter tooled along the highway, he somehow convinced himself that Scazzafava, and all of the pickpocket victims, were at fault themselves. Cocky bastards.

Those moments didn't last long, because the idea itself was asinine. Everyone should pay for their crimes, and Peter was not special.

But what did give him solace was what he'd pulled off. A forty-year plan that, if a few things fell into place the right way, was still on track to work. The thought actually took a breath out of him, as a runner would take at the end of a big race. From making a promise to his friends, standing outside the Hooper Avenue jewelry store, to hunting down Ebel's father, to the day he learned that Ebel, himself, was going to run for mayor, all the way through the present, when he had the entire community scrambling to find a way to not let him win, Peter had strategized the entire effort like a five-star general.

Cruising through the forested and mountainous eastern part of Kentucky, his mind wandered back to those fateful moments immediately after walking out of David Alden's jewelry store and bringing the news to his crew that someone was onto them. He'd thought it would be a blip, and they'd simply move on to another jewelry store – even started to walk to his car before realizing they weren't following him. He'd gone over the conversation in his head a thousand times, wondering what he might have said differently, that would have changed their trajectory, and kept them in the game:

“What kind of flyer are you talking about?” Double T had asked when Peter had returned to the circle.

*He'd shrugged, almost immediately realizing the threat, and that he needed to play it off as insignificant. “I don't know. It was hand-written. Said they were*

*looking for some jewelry that had been stolen at Seaside. I didn't read it too closely."*

*"Maybe you should have," Randy said.*

*"What does it matter?" he said, trying to be convincing. "It's one jeweler. We'll just go to another."*

*At that point, he remembered, he glanced back at the front door to the jewelry store and noticed David Alden still standing there, watching them but not watching them, and waved the group out of his line-of-sight. They stepped in unison ten feet to the right.*

*"You think the police would just give one flyer to one jewelry store?" Randy continued.*

*"Do the police handwrite their flyers?"*

*Randy was a deer in headlights. He shook his head. "How the hell do I know?"*

*He put his arm around Randy's shoulders. "Look, guys, this is nothing. It's a hiccup. Our machine is well-oiled, and this one guy's not going to ruin it for us. He said don't come back? We won't come back."*

*"He said don't come back?" Scott asked quietly.*

*Peter went into motivational speaker mode at that moment. "You're scaring me. What we've accomplished already this summer will set all of us up for the next ten years. Probably more. We haven't been caught. No one knows it's us-"*

*"He does," Randy said, pointing back at Alden.*

*"He doesn't know shit," Peter said. "He's got a suspicion. Is that enough to do anything about it? No. It's not. Otherwise, he would've done it."*

*"Well, we're idiots for standing here in the parking lot," Scott pointed out. "He calls the police, we're sitting ducks. And you have that stupid ring on you."*

*Peter was particularly proud of the next part, and smiled to himself as he meandered down the highway.*

*"This ring?" he'd said, holding it up in between two fingers for them to see. No one answered him, choosing to stand and scorn his immaturity, so he turned and flung the ring up and onto the roof of the building that housed Alden Jewelers and three other storefronts.*

*They were collectively incredulous. "What the hell did you do that for?" Double T stammered.*

*"I didn't mean you had to get rid of it," Scott said. "I just thought it wasn't real smart to be standing here holding it."*

*Peter laughed. "Well, maybe you should've said that."*

*Only, by the time the three of them had even had a chance to show their astonishment, the ring was already safely in Peter's front pocket. He still laughed today that he'd literally taught them the skill, and they'd all fallen for the scam in the parking lot there.*

*"Look," he'd said, calming things down, "I understand if you think we should close up shop for a few days. I get it. It makes sense. Let's take the weekend and regroup."*

*"I don't think you're hearing us, Peter," Scott said.*

*He still wondered what they'd been talking about while he'd been inside the store. He couldn't remember why he'd brought them that night. Ego? Wanting them to see what they were a part of? It was hard to say. But they'd been standing outside, without him, for several minutes – out in the open, while he was trying to hock a piece of stolen jewelry. It was probably asking too much, and ultimately it had cost him.*

*"I'm listening," he'd said, dreading where the conversation was headed.*

*"I think we're done. We're done."*

*"Done?" He looked them each in the face in sequence. "All of you?"*

*"There's too much on the line, Peter," Double T said. He motioned with his thumb toward the jewelry store. "This confirms it. It's too close now."*

*He held his hands out. "This is nothing."*

*"To us, it's everything," Randy had said. Those words penetrated Peter then, and it still did now. "This has been a great time. It's been fun and exciting and thrilling. But it's not who we are. And none of us want to end up with a past that follows us around."*

*He'd stayed quiet for a moment, thinking. Trying to come up with logical reasons why they were wrong, but couldn't on the spot. He knew that pushing them would be too much. It would have the opposite effect from what*



*he wanted to happen. He remembered the looks on their faces. They were afraid. Not of getting caught at that moment, but that Peter would try to sell them on why they were making a mistake. That they would cave to his charm and persuasion. But he know that for a long-term play, going that route would be a mistake. Sure, he could've chipped one away at a time, but that would've just made things worse.*

*So, he'd taken a different tact. "Let me tell you something," he pointed at the three of them, clustered together. "That stuff, under the Boardwalk? It's ours. It belongs to us. And I'm never going to rest until we get it out of there." Randy started to say something, but he stopped him. "Together. Never going to rest."*

*None of the three of them answered, so he let his passive aggressive attempt to get them to continue their schemes rest. Of course, it was, truly, the end, but he remembered trying to soften the new tension among them by driving them, and treating, to Bob's Big Boy for burgers. Double T ordered pancakes.*

*"Never going to rest." He remembered those words hanging in the air.*

*They still hung between them today.*

He felt his phone buzz on the seat next to him, waking him from his daydreaming, and saw his attorney's name pop up on his dashboard screen. With the call button on his steering wheel, he connected the call.

"I'm not dead yet, if that's what you're calling for," he said.

"No, I don't care about that," Starr said, showing an attempt at some dark humor. Or, at least that's how Peter took it. "I have more important news."

"Okay?"

"We found the photo."

Peter's foot instinctively pushed harder on the gas pedal as he looked for somewhere to stop. He wanted to get off the road for this conversation.

## CHAPTER 27

Martin swiped across the screen, ending the call, and set his phone on the table next to his vanilla malt shake. “Okay, the race is on,” he announced.

“What happened?” Connie asked.

“They found the photo they were looking for. Naomi said it’s pretty clear: Blythe and one of his buddies with a shovel, posing for the camera. The other guy – I’m not sure which one it is – has his hands out, showing a bunch of pieces of jewelry. She says it’s going to be difficult to talk our way around this one. We need to get this program up-and-running.”

“Let’s do it,” Laura said, her fingers pecking away at a wireless keyboard transmitting to her tablet. Martin, who considered himself a bit of a tech guy, was jealous when she’d placed her set-up on the table. “Are these all the keywords you want?” She read from her on-screen notes: “Seaside Heights, Jersey Shore, jewelry, treasure, gold, pickpocket, pickpocketer...’ Any others?”

He looked to Connie. “What do you think?”

“She’s the expert. I’m just thinking about how wide a net you can cast. The people you’re trying to reach could be spread all over the country.”

“The world, for that matter,” Laura added.

Martin sat back in his chair, thinking. The shoppe was getting busy, and he was trying to rush through this meeting so Laura could get back to her real summer job. Connie’s other daughter, Chloe, had come in to help on her day off from the restaurant where she worked. He

could tell Connie was getting nervous, but she was still sitting for the moment. “We need to optimize. My thought is that most people who were visiting Seaside in the late seventies were either from this area or from North Jersey, New York or Long Island. Which means we target those areas, and Florida, because that’s where they would’ve ended up.”

“Makes sense,” Connie agreed, looking back at Chloe’s predicament. Currently, there were about a half-dozen people in line.

“You can go, if you need. We’ve got this.”

“I want to be helpful,” she said. “I want to see this work.”

“You’ve been more than helpful. Go run your business.”

More reluctantly than Martin would have envisioned, Connie stood and jumped behind the counter to help Chloe, immediately assisting a young family with their ice cream order.

“So, I’ve got the keywords and the geographic parameters set in. How do you want to break down demographics?”

He snapped out of watching Connie work. “What are my options?”

She held her hands out. “Whatever you want. Age, gender, background, income level... We can do just about anything. It’s smart to try to narrow things down to optimize your budget, so the platforms aren’t showing your ad to people who don’t care.”

Martin realized his head was spinning. He had no clue how to do this. “Thank goodness for you,” he said. “This would’ve taken me forever to figure out. I guess we’re looking for people who are sixty-plus, right?”

“Maybe if we can find their kids, too, in the case of heirlooms, or if they’ve passed away?”

He shook his head in amazement. “If you can find that, more power to you.”

She typed away for a minute or so more as the shoppe’s line started to dwindle. “Okay. I won’t do anything with income level, because it can get screwy with seniors, because they may have minimized their income, or be on social security.”

“What’s that mean?”

“Well, the categories... They may have been at a certain income level in the seventies when they were here, but now their income level is much lower, so they won’t show up in the algorithm.”

He was way out of his league. “I should probably learn this stuff at some point.”

She laughed, which made him happy for a moment, before he realized she was probably laughing at him. “How about budget?”

“We have a thousand dollars to put toward this. What’s a good budget?”

She nodded, thinking. “Okay, let’s do this...,” she proposed.

He cut her off, though, just as Connie returned, the rush subsided. “That doesn’t include your compensation. That’s covered through a different budget.”

“No worries,” Laura said. “What I’ll do is run a few different messages. We’ll put, say, a hundred toward each. See what works, and then do something bigger once we have some traction. That make sense?”

He laughed. “If you say it makes sense, then it makes sense.”

“What about images? Do you have pictures of the jewelry?”

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “We don’t have permission from the court to make them public.”

“Have you asked?” Connie weighed in.

“I actually don’t know. But I can see why they wouldn’t let us. And I don’t know if we want to, because it’d lead to bedlam.”

“So, we’ll need something,” Laura said. “Something compelling.”

“What about your dad’s photos?”

“Hmmm,” Martin considered, taking out his phone. “We were looking for a legitimate reason why we needed to make those public.” He dialed Grey again, then waited a moment for the call to connect. “Yes, it’s me again... Do you think the judge would let us use some of my dad’s photos for this campaign?”

“She doesn’t know you’re doing the campaign,” Grey said. “At least not yet.”

“She’ll know tomorrow.”

“So, how do you ask her today if you can use photos for a campaign that you don’t want her to know about?”

He made eye contact with Connie while he thought. She was trying to follow the conversation through his facial expressions, and it occurred to him that they’d officially forged a connection. Telltale sign. What it would ultimately mean, he wasn’t sure, but it had been a long time for him since he’d had that. It meant something to him.

A path forward occurred to him. “You said they found the photo they needed, yes?”

“I did.”

“So, let’s concede that to them. Tell the judge we don’t need the additional days, and they can move forward with that evidence. I’m good with that.”

“What’s that do?”

He put on an air of indignance. “Well, those are my photos. I want them back.” Grey was quiet for a moment on the other end of the line. “What are you thinking?” he asked her.

“Oh, it’ll work. Just considering how Starr might respond to such a request. He might think something’s up.” He started to say something, but she continued. “Don’t worry about that. I’ll come up with something.”

“You can tell him they can hang onto the selected photos they need. I don’t care about those.”

He heard her sigh. “Yes, but I want that leverage. Blythe is very concerned that his friends’ reputations will be damaged if those photos leak.”

Nodding, he caught Connie’s eye again. “Okay. I’ll leave that up to you. But if you can get me the bulk of the photos back today, that would be a huge help.”

“I’ll work on it.”

They hung up, and Martin looked up at them. “Hopefully, we’ll have some photos for you this evening. I’ll go through...” He stopped, as a wave of emotion hit him. Enough that they both caught it.

To his surprise, Connie reached out and touched the back of his hand. “What is it?”

He let out a sigh. “All my dad wanted was for me to go through these photos for him,” he choked through, stifling it, embarrassed. “Looks like tonight’s the night.”

She smiled at him, which was incredibly comforting, then they both noticed Laura looking at them. Without a reaction, she put her head down and continued typing.

“Maybe save the emotion for the weekend,” Connie said, taking back her hand. “You have work to do.”

“Great point,” Martin agreed, his mind already wandering to the photo collection, and the job ahead of him.

## CHAPTER 28

Abigail's head popped into Martin's open door. "A woman named Maryanne Chase is on the phone for you."

"Thank you," he answered hopefully, picking up the receiver from its cradle on the mayor's desk. Which must have surprised Abigail, as generally, he would pepper her with questions or ask her to take a message. He had a feeling he knew what this call was about, though. "Mayor Ebel."

A sweet older woman's voice crackled through the line. "Mayor Ebel, my name is Maryanne Chase. My husband is Frank Chase."

Neither name meant anything to him. "How can I help you, Mrs. Chase?"

"I saw your advertisement on Facebook, and wanted to call because I lost something very important to me in the summer of nineteen seventy-nine," she said. His heart leapt. It was actually working.

All of the pieces had come together. Grey had made the request to the court to collect the photos, and Starr had obliged without any fuss, probably feeling relief on his own end that they had the evidence that they needed, but certainly not realizing what they were doing. Using some really great shots Martin had found quickly of the bustling Boardwalk in the 1970s, Laura's work had been fast and creative, and at 8:30 a.m., right at the beginning of business hours, they'd clicked the buttons to start the various campaigns. She'd set them up to test a bunch of different platforms, having the presence of mind to not explain to him everything she was doing, because it

would've sent his head spinning. It was now about 11 a.m., and the first call was coming in, so whatever social media magic she'd performed was getting the job done.

Martin wished for a path forward as Chase spoke, hoping that whatever item she was calling about was one they'd pulled from the sand. She continued, "... It was a gold brooch that my mother gave me when I was a little girl." He waited for the description. "A butterfly, with a little white gold clasp."

He had to hold back from yelping. He knew the piece exactly. It was stashed away in one of the security bags in the safe at First Jersey Savings. "Do you have anything we can use to identify the brooch?" he asked as sickeningly sweetly as words had ever come out of his mouth, visions of Peter Blythe angrily calling his rat-faced attorney enhancing the mood.

"Oh, I do, Mayor," she said. He could hear her rummaging through something on her end. "I have a Polaroid of me wearing it. It was actually taken just the week before it went missing. I loved that butterfly."

Something else occurred to him that he strangely hadn't thought of: he was doing something good. He was bringing something positive into people's lives. He hadn't considered it when it was the mafia boss collecting his luxury watch and then going off to whack the guy that took it from him, but with Mrs. Chase, it was completely different. He'd been doing this all along to either stick it to the guy who'd embarrassed him, or to win an election. That what he was doing would mean so much to people instantly changed his perspective on all of it.

"Where are you calling from, Mrs. Chase?"

"I'm in West Palm Beach."

"Is there a way you can get that photo to me?"

"Oh, yes," she said. "I had my grandson put it on the computer for me. We just need your e-mail address, so we can send it."

"Thank you for calling, Mrs. Chase, and letting us know. I hope we're able to help you. I'm going to turn you over to Abigail, in our office. She can get some information from you, and give you the e-mail address."



“Thank you, Mayor. When my daughter called me and said she saw your advertisement, I cried for an hour.” She paused. He could hear her getting nasally. “Thank you for what you’ve done.”

“Let’s keep our fingers crossed. Let me send you over to Abigail.”

He put her on hold, and stood, walking to his door and leaning out. “Abigail, can you help out-” He was cut off by Brianna McDaniel from the *Asbury Park Press*, sitting in the waiting area. “Miss McDaniel. Good morning. How can I help you?”

The young reporter stood and motioned with her head toward Martin’s office. He nodded, and held his hand out for her to enter.

“Abigail, Mrs. Chase is on line one still. She’s got a photo she wants to send us. Can you help her out and get all of her information?”

He followed McDaniel into the office and encouraged her to sit in one of the chairs facing his desk. Before sitting himself, he noticed a text message on his phone. It was from Naomi Grey:

## **CALL ME**

“What can I do for you?”

“I’m not going to apologize, because it was good journalism, but I didn’t like the way everything played out last week,” McDaniel started, keeping eye contact with him. Very professional. He started to say everything was good, but she stopped him. “That was embarrassing, and it was obnoxious, and I wish it didn’t happen the way it did.”

The two of them had a good relationship in that they worked well together. This conversation was much more personal than he’d ever had with a reporter. He was finding it strange, and sat forward in his chair. “Water under the bridge at this point. What can I do for you?”

“Someone sent me your ad. I want to write a story on what you’re doing.”

“The ad? Oh, about reaching out to people to see if they had anything stolen?” He sat back, waving a hand at his own ambitions. “It’s a shot in the dark. We had a little

money in a marketing budget, and thought we might be able to connect with some people.”

“It’s a shot in the dark, but it’s a really nice thing. Can you imagine recovering something important that was stolen from you, and you thought was gone forever? After forty years? That’s going to change people’s lives. I want to tell the story.”

He didn’t know if he blushed outwardly, but he could feel it himself. “Okay,” he said, nodding with a half-shrug. “I’m happy to talk to you about it. Can’t hurt, right?”

She had a sly smile on her face. “You’re not understanding. I’ve already talked to our AP bureau rep here in South Jersey. She said if we do the story together, she can syndicate it.”

“Syndicate it?” he repeated. He knew what it meant, but he was trying to figure out why she would say it.

“All over the country.”

He looked at her for a moment, then burst out laughing. “Well, that will certainly extend the reach of the ads.”

“Yes, it will.”

His phone buzzed again. “I’m sorry,” he said, “someone’s desperately trying to get me.” He illuminated it. Grey again.

### **CALL ME. I NEED YOU AT THE COURTHOUSE.**

He texted back quickly that he needed five minutes. To which she replied immediately him ASAP.

Finally, he looked back up at McDaniel. “I’m sorry, again. What can I answer for you?”

Wondering what was going on at the courthouse, with hopes, no prayers, that he hadn’t stepped over the line with the advertising campaign, he did his first ever interview for a nationwide audience.

\*\*\*

Martin saw her as soon as he got out of his car in the Ocean County Courthouse parking lot. He winced, but

not a sharply as usual. For the first time in a long time, he held the upper hand.

Miranda Sanderson-Cox had seen him, as well, and was storming in his direction. She was in a navy business suit and skirt, and strode across the parking lot with purpose. “Mayor Ebel,” she demanded, “what’s going on? Why are we here?”

He closed the car door behind him. “I don’t know why you’re here, Miranda. I’m here because the judge asked me to be here.”

Quickly, he analyzed the conversation. There were probably only a few people who would be privy to what was going on, so someone in Boro Hall was tipping her off. To what end, he didn’t know, because there wasn’t anything she could do here. But it would be interesting to know who was either aligned with her, or playing both sides.

She stopped in front of him, impeding his path to the courthouse, but not really. “This isn’t a game, Martin.”

“Isn’t it?”

Leaving it at that, he moved to the side to pass her and continued toward the front doors. She followed him – he could hear her shoes clicking on the pavement, trailing behind. As awkward as it was, he tried to walk casually, and was distracted by his phone buzzing in his pocket as he approached the door. Expecting another push from Grey for him to get there, he pulled it out and did a quick check.

Instead, it was from Abigail:

**WE’VE GOT ANOTHER ONE. A GUY FROM NEW ORLEANS. ALREADY SENT THE PHOTO.**

The phone buzzed in his hand again as Sanderson-Cox caught up to him. He turned his body as a picture emerged of a guy at old Yankee Stadium – he could see the famous façade in the background – posed with a beer at a ballgame. On his right ring finger, in the hand holding the beer so it was pointed outward, was a massive college ring – so big, in fact, that Martin could read that it was from New York’s Adelphi University without having to Zoom. He typed quickly back: **EXCELLENT.**

Looking up to Sanderson-Cox, he said, "I'm confused. Why are you here?"

"I want to know what's going on." They were standing on the steps leading up to the courthouse's main doors.

He shook his head. "It's a legal matter with the boro, Miranda. I don't know that you have any standing to be in the room." She started to retort, but he continued, "I mean, I can ask the judge. But, to be honest, the attorneys are handling most of it."

"I heard about your ad campaign," she said, looking him right in the eye and pausing, either for dramatic effect, or working out what she was going to say next. He tried to avoid her as much as possible, because even before she decided to run against him, she was famous for trying to drag people into arguments. Usually over nonsense. There was just something about her that drove her to conflict. He felt like he'd gotten better at stifling her through apathy. "That won't solve the fact that you're wasting the boro's resources to prop up your campaign. I *will* call you out on it."

He smiled, which he hoped would drive her crazy. "See how that goes."

Then, he turned and pulled the door open, offering for her to walk through. Instead, she stood at the bottom of the steps defiantly. After giving her a moment, he nodded to her. "Miranda," he said, then entered the building, leaving her outside.

Assuming there were multiple people awaiting his arrival, he speedwalked through the building to the judge's chambers, where he'd been instructed to go. He'd called Grey on the drive over to find out what he was walking into, but she hadn't answered.

Reaching Petrelli's office, he walked in to a surprise.

Seated in one of the waiting room chairs was South Jersey's most famous realtor, Scott Belanger.

\*\*\*

"What do you mean, Scott's there?" Peter demanded into his phone. "He told me he didn't want anything to do with this."

“I’m sure he feels like you’ve put him into a spot,” Starr replied, having slid away from the judge to connect with his out-of-town client.

He huffed. “I wish he’d get it through his thick head. I’m doing this *for* him. I’ve kept him out of it, so he could stay in the shadows. Now, he’s opened up a can of worms.” He’d pulled aside from the asphalt path lining the Kentucky side of the Ohio River, called the Louisville Riverwalk. To his right, the late morning sun was reflecting off the downtown skyline, and he could feel the heat already coming – it was expected to top 90. Typically, he would try to avoid that kind of heat, but the mix of not being able to be on-hand in New Jersey, and the tension of being sought after by one of the biggest mob bosses from the ‘60s and ‘70s had made him unable to sit still. Hiding out in his hotel room, as nice as the historic Galt House was, was driving him crazy. So, he’d been keeping on the move simply to keep himself occupied.

“Why do you say that?”

The answer wasn’t one that he necessarily wanted his attorney to know, because it was more self-serving than anything. He knew that Scott, especially, but probably Tim, too, were not on the same page as he was, and his involvement would likely screw up forty years of planning. “Mainly because I don’t know what he’s going to say or do.”

“Well, they just called Ebel over, and he’s on his way here. Apparently, he’s started running social media ads encouraging people to send proof that they had something stolen that year.”

“Can he do that?” He cautiously checked his surroundings, just to continue to be sure he was in public view, then chastised himself for being so nervous.

“I’m not sure. We’re going to argue no. The judge gave us seven days to find out proof that the items belong to us, which we’ve done. In fact, she even made the point that the catalog of items had not been made public. Scazzafava slipped in, and appears to have been given special treatment, but we’re not going to push that. My intent is to ask the judge to end this now, and make her ruling. There’s no need to drag this out.”

“I should be there.”

“You’re covered, Peter. I also let Miranda Sanderson-Cox know. She’s on her way here, as well. Hopefully, her presence will irritate Ebel enough to throw him off his game in front of the judge. You stay safe.”

He looked around again. Runners, bikers, a young couple with a cocker spaniel on a leash. Essentially, no need to be nervous. “I could at least talk Scott down from whatever he’s planning.”

“Well, let me get back in there and find out exactly what that is.”

“Okay,” he nodded, though Starr couldn’t see him, and they hung up the call.

Looking across the river at an array of boating activity and Indiana on the other side, he swore under his breath as he tried to ascertain what Scott was up to. At the least, making himself known would give him claim to a portion of the stash, and whatever proceeds might come from it. Which was fine for Peter, as that was the plan, anyway. What worried him was Scott’s opposition from the outset to the entire gambit. What would he say in that room that would foil Peter’s plans?

Feeling as though he needed to keep moving, and the strain of the situation starting to make him really feel the heat bearing down on him, he stepped back onto the paved trail and continued west, away from downtown.

Looking behind him, he now spotted a suited, sunglassesed man alone – strange for a walking trail on a 90-degree day – walking the same direction as him. Knowing at his age that he wasn’t going to be able to outrun anyone if it came down to it, he peered ahead for an exit from the trail, and found one two football fields ahead. Without looking back again, he reached it, ducked under the highway and emerged into the adjoining neighborhood, where he quickly dialed up an Uber. He waited the three minutes the app told him for when a driver would arrive, and then left the area, not seeing the man again, and commending himself for being rather safe than sorry.

\*\*\*

Martin had never been admonished by a judge before, and it wasn't something he wanted to do ever again. He was a good kid growing up, generally followed the rules and didn't get into hijinks beyond some typical teenage silliness. Getting in trouble was foreign to him, and Petrelli was not happy about the advertising campaign.

"I'm not interested in your logic, Mayor Ebel," she was saying, after he tried to pull the "it makes sense" in defense of his actions. "I made a ruling giving Mister Blythe the time to find his evidence. I did not say anything about taking the matter to the public."

"Your Honor, if I may," Grey jumped in. "The precedent was set by allowing Mister Scazzafava to recover his watch from the stash. As the one responsible for digging up the cache, Mayor Ebel simply thought that there might be others with evidence of their ownership."

"Again, counselor, we're not talking about what the mayor thought was appropriate. We're talking about following my ruling." She turned to Martin. "You realize I could hold you in contempt."

His heart leapt. He knew he was stretching the rules, but didn't realize it was that serious of an offense.

"We don't want that, Your Honor," Starr, who'd stepped out presumably to call Blythe and had just returned, jumped in. "We understand where the mayor was going. However, since we've recovered the evidence we need and returned the rest of the photos to Mayor Ebel at his request, we request that the ads be pulled and the items be turned over to their rightful owner, Mister Blythe. As we've discussed, the longer this hangs out there, and the more Mayor Ebel tries to make this public, the more convoluted the situation gets."

Petrelli mercifully pulled her stare from Martin and turned to Starr. "Well, that was my original plan when I called you all here this morning."

"But?" Starr said.

She held her hand out. They all followed it with their eyes to see she was motioning to Belanger. "Mister Belanger showed up this morning and identified himself as one of the four young men in the photo you pulled from Mayor Ebel's father's collection."

"And, what does that mean?"

“Well, Mister Starr, as one of the four, and my understanding is that one of your friends in the photo recently passed away, he has an equal say to your client as to what happens with the items pulled from the cache.”

Martin heard Starr let out a breath, sensing an air of defeat, which restored some of his own energy having had it obliterated by Petrelli moments before.

Starr knew that everyone in the room heard it, and took a moment to compose himself. “Yes?”

“Mister Belanger would like to give Mayor Ebel thirty days to allow people to submit evidence of their ownership of specific items in the cache.”

Starr was quick to respond. “Your Honor, an ‘equal share’ shouldn’t be able to supersede your original ruling-”

“Not to worry,” she cut him off, pulling a piece of paper from her desk. “This notarized letter from Mister Timothy Turner of Bristol, Connecticut saying the same thing should clear up any confusion in that regard. I’m assuming you know Mister Turner?”

Starr started to say something, but this time Belanger cut him off. “I can assure you, Mister Starr, Randy’s family feels the same way.”

The attorney looked around the room at the faces of the group that had conspired to defeat his client. “So, we’re done, then?”

“No, I wouldn’t think so,” Petrelli said, matter-of-factly. “It’s highly unlikely that every piece of jewelry that was stolen by your client and his friends that summer will be accounted for. From the evidence you’ve provided, once thirty days has expired, the remainder of the cache will be turned over to Mister Blythe, Mister Belanger, Mister Turner and your fourth friend’s estate in equal parts.”

Martin was trying to read Petrelli’s motivations as she spoke. She was not happy with him, of course, for overreaching, but she appeared to have a glimmer of glee that some level of justice was being done. He’d thought from the beginning that it was inherently wrong for Blythe and his team to simply get away with everything they’d done, even if it had happened forty years before. As awful



as it sounded to Martin, a citizen, he could imagine Petrelli wasn't fond of having a crime, perpetrators, an admission and evidence in front of her without being able to do anything about it. Belanger's arrival had given her a way out.

"Thank you, Your Honor," Starr said, his tail between his legs.

For now, of course. Martin knew Blythe wouldn't go down without a fight.

The judge turned to him. "Mayor Ebel, I'm going to let you continue the ads, but I want you to know, I've got my eye on you. Tread softly the rest of the way, or I will revert back to my original ruling, Mister Belanger's preference or not."

Back on the hot seat, he cleared his throat. "I should mention, then, that just before coming over here, I interviewed with the *Asbury Park Press* about the ad campaign. They intend to submit the story to the AP."

"Your Honor..." Starr pleaded.

Petrelli looked at Martin, thinking before speaking. "Did you initiate this?"

"Your Honor?"

"Did you send out a press release to the media?"

He shook his head firmly. "I did not. Brianna McDaniel from the paper got wind of the ads somehow and showed up at my office."

After a moment, she nodded. "Okay. It's out of your control."

He nodded, feeling a small amount of his tension ease.

"That's all, everyone. Thirty days starts today. Anyone claiming ownership must show definitive proof, and if I see any video or photos of even one of the items from the safe out in the public, I end it immediately, and I don't care whose feelings are hurt. Got it?"

They all agreed, and filed out of the office. Martin instinctively braced for an altercation with Starr, but instead Blythe's attorney turned and headed down the corridor, his phone already at his ear.

"Wow," Grey burst out from the other direction.

He turned to her. "What is it?"

She held her phone up for him to see. On-screen was a headline:

“Anthony Scazzafava, Purported Mob Boss, Dead at 83.”

## CHAPTER 29

Martin poked his head out of the office, getting Abigail's attention. "Did that lady from Long Branch work out?"

She finished whatever she was typing and looking up at him. "The court said it was a match."

He smiled, doing the math in his head. The call had been out for about a week, and he estimated about thirty percent of the items from the cache had been successfully claimed. "Good." Within his hopes, but beyond his expectations.

"I'm happy about it," she said. "What a nice story. I have special things with *mysister*, too. I'd be devastated if they were taken from us."

So many of the requests coming in had dramatic stories attached to them – something Martin had never considered when he was orchestrating the scheme. That these things meant so much to the people who'd lost them was amplifying his guilt over his father's photos. Did he just not have it in him to be sentimental for himself?

"Do you have a goal in mind?" Abigail asked.

"I do," he said, pulling himself from his thoughts, then grinned. "As many as possible. I'd like the safe empty, if we can make it happen."

"I doubt that can happen," she said, the realist, "but we can try."

"We will."

"Oh, and Wendy Price from the Historical Society reached out. She said she's interested in talking with you about the photos you used for the campaign."

Martin sighed. That was something he couldn't deal with right now – besides not knowing what he actually could or couldn't say. "Do me a favor," he said, "can you call Wendy back and let her know that I will definitely connect with her, but I can't yet because of the on-going situation? Tell her soon, though."

Abigail nodded, and he ducked back into his office. He got along well with Wendy, who was chair of the Seaside Heights Historical Society, but she'd have to wait. With the help of McDaniel's story and the ad campaign, they were fielding about a dozen calls a day. Most of them – as they'd suspected – were from either locally, from New York and Long Island, or from the retirement haven of Florida, though McDaniel's work had garnered national coverage, with the most distant inquiry coming from Phoenix. After their conversation the week before at the courthouse, Judge Petrelli had instituted a few more rules, including that her office would make the final determination as to whether the claim was legitimate. They were still receiving extraneous inquiries, but for the most part, the requests coming in that included proof were being deemed as authentic by the judge at a ninety percent clip.

Returning to his desk, he sat for a moment, thinking. A big question that had been on his mind overnight was how all of this was affecting his re-election campaign. As a small town mayor, he didn't have the resources to do polling, so a lot of it was simply trying to gauge the feel of the community. He hadn't heard anything from Sanderson-Cox relative to his advertising program, which made him feel like she was preparing something substantial, knowing her. But since she hadn't responded, it offered him an unexpected luxury to pull ahead of her with the positive press that the boro was currently getting. Perhaps for the first time since the campaign started, he'd be ready for whatever she was going to throw at him.

He started to jot down some ideas about how to take some of the national attention and use it to score points locally when Abigail appeared in his doorway. She had a strange look on her face.

"What is it?"

“Vincent Scazzafava is here to see you.”

The vision of the news story on Grey’s phone hit him at the same time as the déjà vu of the same thing happened just a week before, and it took him a moment to realize that she couldn’t possibly be talking about the dad, but the son. “Junior?” he said weakly.

She nodded, then held her hands out as to say, “Who else?”

His mind whirred with why the son, the head of one of New York City’s most powerful unions, was visiting him in the wake of his father’s death, but he failed to come up with an explanation.

Until Abigail filled him in on the rest of the details: “There’s a moving truck outside, too. Did we order something?”

He felt a smile cross his face. “No, it’s okay. I’ll take care of it.”

Getting up from his desk, he made his way around to the door. She left and he followed her out, to find a dark-haired, dark-skinned Italian man, about his age, that he could tell immediately from the eyes was his father’s son. His presence was very different from his father though. Rather than a kingly aura surrounding him, Martin had a sense of Lancelot, commanding equal respect as the king, but for very different reasons. Those reasons being Vinny Jr. wasn’t concerned about you seeing him coming.

After probably too long of a pause to take him in, Martin walked toward him, extending his hand. “Mister Scazzafava,” he said with empathy in his voice. “It’s good to meet you. I was so sorry to hear about your father.”

Scazzafava took his hand firmly, nodding. “Thank you,” he said. “It’s good to meet you, as well. My father had nothing but good things to say about you.”

A surprise, certainly, but Martin smiled and nodded. “Well, that means a lot.”

“We’ve got stuff for you in the truck,” Scazzafava said, pointing back toward Boro Hall’s front doors. “Maybe you and I could talk for a bit, and my guys can work?”

“Sure,” he stammered, not certain of how that was going to work. “I mean, all my stuff-”

“Oh, they’ll transfer everything for you and get rid of the old furniture.” He looked to Abigail. “We have stuff

for you, too. But we'll be quick, so you're not interrupted for long."

She nodded agreeably, having no idea what she was agreeing to.

There was an awkward pause for a moment while Martin and Abigail figured out how to proceed, but Martin broke it. "We have a conference room," he said, motioning in its general direction.

"Actually, Mayor, I was hoping we might go for a walk."

"Oh. Whatever you'd like. Let me just grab my sunglasses." He swung back into his office quickly and pulled his sunglasses and keys from off his desk, then re-emerged into the reception area to find two enormous men evaluating the width of the doorway, a glimpse of rich cherrywood, perhaps the corner of a desk, behind them. He motioned Scazzafava toward the door. "Abigail, it's up to you if you want to stay or take off for a little bit. Whatever you'd like."

"I'll probably run over to the bank," she said, beginning to collect her things, and likely wondering what the hell was going on.

Martin followed Scazzafava out the door and a moment later they were on the sidewalk outside Boro Hall. "Where to?" he asked.

"I was hoping you might indulge me in a walk over to the Boardwalk. I haven't been here in decades."

"Like... Not since... You know... The watch was stolen?"

"Well, you would think so. That was a bad day. I'll tell you, my Dad never brought us back here. I came back a couple times in the eighties with some buddies, but no family trips. Even with my kids. If he'd found out that we went, it wouldn't have gone over well. He liked Florida, so that's where we went."

Martin motioned again, this time down Sherman Avenue, toward the ocean. They started walking, side-by-side. "He took it that hard, huh?"

"You have no idea. Violent anger. I'll tell you, that Blythe guy is lucky my dad didn't get to him. He'd be in pieces."

A lump hit Martin's throat as he remembered evading the question he'd been directly asked while exiting the old man's car. He wanted the person responsible, and Martin had kind of mumbled that everything was being done through Blythe's attorney before fleeing. He hadn't thought about it since, but standing on the sidewalk watching the luxury car pull away, he'd hoped that he hadn't irritated Scazzafava Sr. by not being helpful. As much as he disliked Blythe, that was going a little far.

He wanted to know where that conversation stood, though. "And you?"

"And me, what? Do I have the same kind of retribution in mind?" He shook his head. "It's not my fight. Sure, like anyone, I'd like to honor my father, but I'm not going to put a ton of effort into hunting down a teenager who did something stupid. It's a waste of resources." Martin felt a significant amount of tension leave his body. Though, he noticed he hadn't said "no" repercussions. "No, I'm here at his request on two pieces of business: get you the furniture he promised you, and help you win your election."

That made him stop on the sidewalk. Not expecting it, Scazzafava continued a few steps before turning around.

"Your father, one of the most important people in the state, before he passed away, left you with final wishes that involved me? Someone he met for the first time a few days ago? How is that possible?"

"I can't emphasize enough how much that watch meant to him."

His breath was taken away. There was no way he could have anticipated the turn of events over the past few days. Not even if he was writing a movie script.

Scazzafava motioned with his head toward the Boardwalk. "Come on."

Finding the capacity to continue, Martin caught up with him and they continued the rest of the block and up the ramp onto the Boardwalk. He noticed Scazzafava walked intentionally heavy on the wooden boards with his steps, and looked up to see him grinning.

"I love that sound," he said. "Always loved coming here."

Martin followed him until he stopped midway between the ramp and the beach, then turned to take in the view, actually pulling out his phone and snapping a bunch of photos up and down the pathway. He was like a little kid.

The Boardwalk was busy enough, with a few hundred people in view. It was still early, with lunchtime approaching. The beach, itself, was packed, and Boardwalk traffic would pick up in the late afternoon when the brunt of the heat had subsided – today’s temps were again lined up to get into the mid-eighties, and he was sweating from the walk. Rain still wasn’t due for days. For someone who had childhood memories of Seaside Heights, the current activity would make for a nice remembrance.

“You smell that?” Scazzafava asked.

“I do,” Martin said, smiling, picking out Italian sausage among the scents.

“That’s going to have to happen before we head back.”

Not sure if they were envisioning the same thing, Martin laughed with him. The food was certainly a hook for anyone who had ever visited.

Finished with his re-introduction, Scazzafava stopped to get his bearings. “Just want to see where I am here... Yes, it’s this way.” He started walking southbound along the Boardwalk, and Martin followed. Without a word, he moved a football field’s length until he turned and meandered into one of Seaside’s arcades, giving Martin an inkling of where he was headed.

They were greeted with flashing lights and electronic music as visitors of all ages won prizes and tickets from a slew of machines. A fan of arcades from the time he was a child, once he was an adult Martin had always thought that the harmless fun and excitement of winning that the arcades created were effective training for young people for the more serious real-money gaming opportunities at Atlantic City an hour away. Smart people created the system.

As predicted, Scazzafava turned toward the Skee-ball machines along the far left wall of the building and



stopped in the carpeted area in front of the array of machines. Only two of the machines were currently being used, by a brother and sister young enough to not have the strength to roll the balls all the way up the alley, and their overzealous parents, likely reliving their own memories, jumping in to help.

After a moment that was clearly reflection, he turned to Martin and sighed.

“This was the place?” Martin asked.

He nodded. “Yes, right here.” He pointed. “I was playing at this machine here. This kid came running across and smashed into my dad. They both went to the ground. The kid hopped up and took off. My dad got to his feet, and I remember him glaring at the kid. See, to me, he wasn’t a union boss or a leader in the community. He was just dad. And he was tough. No bullshit. Even as a five-year-old, I knew that kid was toast. And that was even before we found out about the watch – that happened later, when we were outside on the Boardwalk.” He stopped, thinking. “I think I remember the kid apologizing, but that’s fuzzy. It’s always shocking for a kid to see his dad fall down.”

“Yes, it is.” Martin remembered his step-father, David, slipping on ice in the driveway once, and how much it shook him up to see someone he considered to be unshakeable shaken.

“I’m not convinced it was Peter Blythe,” he said, looking past Martin, still contemplating.

“Oh, no?”

He snapped out of it, shaking his head. “Of course, my father’s memory of it is going to be sharper than someone who was just five at the time, but what I remember of the kid didn’t turn into the old man that was at the press conference. Who knows, though?”

Martin’s mind flashed to his father’s photo of the four pickpockets, which hadn’t been made public yet. He wondered if he could show it to Scazzafava, but thought about what that could possibly mean for any of the others – including the family of Blythe’s friend who’d passed away. Couldn’t happen.

“I love my father,” he continued. “And I think the best thing I can do to honor him is to do exactly what he asked

me to do.” Martin nodded, feeling a stab of guilt for not having done that for his own father. “So, what are your plans?”

Unexpected. “I’m sorry?”

“What are your plans after you’re done as mayor? What are you running for next?”

A laugh escaped, unavoidable. He shook his head. “I’ll tell you, Mister Scazzafava-”

“Vinny.”

He sighed. “I’ll tell you, Vinny, I’m just hoping to escape this November with another four years.”

“Oh, we’ll make sure that happens.” He reached inside the pocket of his khakis and pulled out a thick envelope, handing it to Martin. “My dad wanted you to have this.”

“I can’t-”

“I know what you’re thinking,” he said, forcing the small package into Martin’s hand. “Nothing underhanded here. These are all legitimate contributions. You have massive support from our union.”

Martin felt the envelope in his hands. It was as thick as a deck of playing cards. “That’s actually not what I was thinking,” he said, honestly, having separated the younger businessman Scazzafava from the dad’s storied past on the walk over, just from his demeanor. “I just don’t want you to go through any trouble for me.”

He shook his head. “It’s no trouble at all. My dad wanted me to take care of you. Use what you need to win here, and then hang onto the rest for when you run for something bigger. It’ll give you a nice start.”

Smiling, he tucked the envelope into his own pants pocket. “Because of a watch?”

“Because of your character. We like character.”

He took a deep breath. “Thank you,” he said, solemnly. The whole thing had started so he could protect his political career and reputation from someone who was trying to take advantage of him. Now, he was being commended for his humanity. “I’m glad I was able to help bring him some finality before he passed away.” He watched Scazzafava take in the scene for another minute or so before interrupting. “Can I buy you lunch? Sausage?”

“Oh, no. I’m actually going to get some for everybody back at the office there. Thank you, though.”

He started walking back toward the Boardwalk, so Martin followed, fishing past the thick envelope in his pocket to pull out his sunglasses before emerging into the sunlight. They started walking north again, passing the ramp where they’d come up onto the Boardwalk. As they strolled, Martin had a brainstorm to cement a few relationships at the same time. “I hate to ask this of you, but can we divert for a moment, so I can introduce you to someone?”

“Of course.”

Steering aside, he led Scazzafava into Connie’s candy shoppe, the bell ringing as they entered. A small line was queued up at the register, but Laura, addressing the customers with another teenage girl that he hadn’t met, nodded in his direction when she saw him. He mouthed to her if her mother was around, and she motioned for him to go to the back room and get her. Which was new, but he appreciated the familiarity.

Walking around the counter, he poked his head through the swinging double doors and saw Connie perched at the prep area, dipping strawberries in gooey chocolate. She looked up, a look of surprise on her face to see him.

“Laura’s busy. She said I should just come back to get you.”

She shrugged. “No problem. You’re like part of the team now. Wanna get your hands dirty? I’ve got an extra apron.”

He laughed warmly. “I was actually wondering if you had a minute to meet someone.”

She held her hands out and looked down at her apron, which was covered in chocolate streaks. “Really?”

“You look great.”

“Oh, I’m sure,” she ridiculed him, then picked up a wet towel off the countertop and wiped her hands. Martin held the door for her, and she followed him out.

Scazzafava smiled at their approach. “Connie, this is Vincent Scazzafava.”

She gasped audibly. “Oh, geez, Martin. You could’ve given me some warning.” Scazzafava laughed, extending

his hand, which she took. "I'm so sorry to hear about your father. I read the biography they wrote about him a few years ago. He was a fascinating man."

"All lies," Scazzafava said, grinning. "Except for the good parts."

"This is Connie Walsh," Martin finished the introduction. "She's my friend, confidant, campaign advisor and, as you can see, successful small business owner. That's her daughter, Laura, who was the mastermind of our social media campaign."

"Sorry for my appearance," Connie said. "If I had known I was *meeting people today*," she punched Martin playfully in the arm, "I would've prepared myself better."

"No worries at all," Scazzafava nodded. "I'm a huge small business guy. It smells wonderful in here."

"This place is a treasure here on the Boardwalk," Martin weighed in. "Connie inherited the shoppe from her father."

"Seems to be a theme," Scazzafava said.

"Yes," Connie agreed. "All of our fathers have us standing right here, right now. That has to mean something."

"How's your father play in?" Scazzafava said, addressing Martin.

Connie answer for him. "It was Martin's dad's pictures of Seaside that got the whole thing started."

"I'd like to hear that story at some point."

Martin nodded, smiling, the incriminating photo of Blythe and his friends in the back of his mind. "I'll make sure of it," he said, not actually knowing how that would play out.

"Well, I'd better get back to it," Connie said. "I was just dipping strawberries and can't let the chocolate set."

"Absolutely," Scazzafava said. "It was my pleasure meeting you. Let me ask, though – my wife loves chocolate. If I ask your daughter to make me a box for a couple hundred bucks, she could do something nice for her?"

"Certainly. I'll let her-"

"No, go finish what you were doing. I'll just hop in the line here."

“Okay,” she smiled. “Thank you. Pleasure to meet you.”

Connie retreated to the back room, leaving the two of them standing third in line. They were silent for a moment before Scazzafava spoke. “It’s going to melt, isn’t it?”

“I’m sorry?”

“If I get chocolate and we walk back to the office, it’ll be a puddle by the time we get back.”

Martin laughed, never having considered that people in positions like his new friend would be worried about such intricacies of daily life. “Probably.”

“Maybe I’ll have her make it, and then I’ll swing back before leaving.”

“Seems like a better idea.”

“That your girlfriend?”

“Who?”

“Connie?”

He shook his head. “No. Just a good friend.”

“For now.” Scazzafava’s elbow bumped him with enough force to cause him to stumble.

His attention was diverted, though, as Connie appeared in the swinging door to the kitchen. “Martin, can I grab you for a quick second?” she asked. He noticed she wasn’t smiling.

He motioned to Scazzafava if he’d be alright for a moment, then followed her in the back room. Strangely, given their friendship, he’d never been in their commercial kitchen. Chocolates of various sizes lined the stainless steel countertops, and the smell was alluring even for someone like Martin, who wasn’t a huge chocolate fan.

“What’s up?” he asked, smiling and riding the high of a rare shining event for himself.

“What are you doing?” she demanded.

That caught him off-guard. He couldn’t help but glance down at her apron. “It’s just chocolate,” he said. “He doesn’t care—”

“I’m not talking about the chocolate.”

He stopped for a moment. “I’m confused. I’m missing something.”

“These are your new friends? These are the people you hang out with now?”

“Well...” he thought as he motioned back toward the store. “I wouldn’t say exactly-”

“How long have we been friends?”

“Since we were teenagers, Connie. Why are you-”

“You have been in this store countless times, and you have never brought anyone in to introduce them to me.”

He started to retort that he’d had Naomi Grey in the shop just days before, but knew better. He put his hands up. “I’m sorry. I understand. But he came and donated new furniture to the boro, and contributed to my campaign. Plus, we hit it off. I was excited. It was nice to have a small victory. I thought I’d share it with you.” He was trying not to sound defensive, but knew he was failing.

She shook her head. “I don’t care about any of that.”

“What are we talking about, then?”

She glanced toward the store and moved closer to him, lowering her voice. “These people directly threatened Peter Blythe. What Blythe did is despicable, but he doesn’t deserve that. He was a kid. I don’t think you should be... encouraging this, at all.”

He shook his head. “No, Vinny’s very different from his father.”

“Because you know both of them so well. Right? What did he tell you he’s not going to do anything to Blythe?”

Marty could feel his heart starting to beat faster at her challenge, suddenly finding himself caught between a rock and a hard place. He knew there was no way he’d be telling Scazzafava no thank you. But would it cost him all the work he’d put in with Connie?

“Be careful, Martin,” she warned. “Use your head on this one.”

He let out a breath. “I’d better get out there. Can we talk later?”

She thought for a moment, unmoved by his burying his own emotion on the topic. “I’d rather not,” she said, then turned toward her chocolates.

Martin turned and walked back into the shop, not knowing what his next steps with Connie might be. It hurt, and had been completely unexpected. And now he had to save face in front of Scazzafava.

He saw immediately that Vinny Jr.'s chocolate order had emptied the showcase, and imagined that Connie, working away in the back, would either be pleased with their day, or loathe that it had happened.

Then, they continued up the Boardwalk and made the sausage sandwich vendor's day, as well, before Martin and his controversial new friend headed back to Boro Hall.

At least he'd have a comfortable new chair to sit on, while he tried to figure out what the hell had just happened.

## CHAPTER 30

Peter saw them walking away from him, carrying a large bag of presumably sandwiches after leaving the sausage pagoda, and then disappearing down the ramp back toward the adjoining neighborhood. He'd had to Google who the tall Italian man was that was with Ebel, though he had a feeling he knew before he looked. The search confirmed that it was Scazzafava's son. What he was doing in Seaside, Peter could only imagine.

They wouldn't have noticed him – or, at least, they wouldn't have been able to recognize him. He wore dark sunglasses, a wide-brimmed Panama hat, and was dressed more casually than he had dressed in years, having stopped at a department store to grab his first-ever pair of cargo shorts. A Jersey Shore t-shirt completed the ensemble, and helped to ensure that no one would approach him as “that guy from the press conference.”

Feeling less and less like Starr was adequately representing him, having lost every battle so far, once Peter got the go-ahead to return, he'd driven all night back to the coast. He'd checked in at a hotel at about 4 a.m., slept for a few hours, and then had headed to the Boardwalk for a rendezvous of his own. Only one person knew he was officially back in town, and Peter expected him to be strolling along in less than ten minutes.

Ebel showing up had been a coincidence, and despite his going incognito, Peter had ducked into one of the many tourist apparel shops along the Boardwalk to stay



out of view. He'd thought that he could reasonably avoid any connections to the on-going situation for a little bit, at least, and hadn't expected to see the mayor traipsing up and down the Boardwalk in the middle of a business day.

Scazzafava, Jr. was another story. The old man was dead, which had given Peter an air of relief, but he hadn't considered that he was now personally part of his family's legacy. Was his threat that had been relayed to him deep enough that Scazzafava would have passed instructions down to his son on how to handle it, which is why he was visiting? It was hard for him to envision any other scenario at this point. Though, following them, to Peter whatever was happening appeared to be somewhat casual. He didn't know, if the mob was going to whack someone, if it was just business as usual before and after: *Get some chocolate. A bagful of sausages. And then slit somebody's throat. All in a day's work.*

There was a bit of irony at play. Peter had taken the role as the face of the operation back in the '70s, and maintained it today. So, when Scazzafava learned of their malfeasance, it was Peter who wore it, and him who had become a target of sorts. The problem was that the old man's tussle on the floor of the arcade, that led him to have his watch stolen... Peter had nothing to do with it. It wasn't him. And once the stuff was in the pit and buried, he most often didn't know who'd pulled it. In this instance, however, he knew exactly who'd tackled Scazzafava, and if anyone else found out, it would seriously compound the problems.

The rule had been simple. Their work was done outside, on the Boardwalk, with 360-degree escape routes. They did not lift inside the buildings. Yes, it was coincidence that the victim had been Scazzafava Sr., but rules had been broken, and now here they were.

His eye caught a familiar face walking up the ramp to the Boardwalk just past the Casino Pier, and immediately started in that direction. He stopped, however, when he saw a second familiar face trailing behind.

Tim had joined Scott for their meeting.

That immediately changed the dynamic for the conversation they were about to have, and Peter quickly adjusted his thinking. It wasn't that he thought he could

influence Scott, but presenting his point-of-view would certainly be easier in a one-on-one environment. Now, he was outnumbered, and he knew that, in addition, Tim was more aggressive in his opposition to the entire situation, so the nature of the discussion would be very different than if it were just the two of them, as had been planned.

Thinking as he walked, he approached them, pleased that his disguise was good enough to even mislead his friends. They didn't realize it was him until he was about ten feet away, though Scott was distracted, understandably, with a phone call. He hung up just when they were about six feet away. Peter thought he saw Scott take a deep breath to compose himself.

"Everything okay?" he asked.

"Everything's great," Scott said dismissively, then softened. "This the new you?"

Peter laughed. "I thought it best to stay out of the spotlight." He looked to Tim. "I didn't expect to see *you* here."

His friend nodded to him, and stuck out his hand. "I thought it was important to connect."

Peter took his hand, then pulled him in for a quick hug. He turned and greeted Scott the same way.

"Did you have somewhere in mind we could talk?" Scott asked. "It's toasty out here."

He motioned with his head toward the rooftop bar a few storefronts down. "I was thinking we grab a drink. Last time we were all here together, we weren't old enough. Thought it would be fun to see things through a different lens."

"I think that's unavoidable," Tim said.

Peter couldn't tell if he was being playful or unnecessarily serious, so he slapped him on the arm. "Come on, man, we're on the Boardwalk. Let's have some fun."

Tim shook his head. This was going to take some work.

Leading his two friends, Peter made his way into the restaurant, his eyes adjusting to the light from the bright sun, though he kept his sunglasses on for the charade. They walked up a set of wooden stairs and emerged onto

the rooftop deck, where a bar and a dozen or so bistro tables were set up, the umbrellas sitting over them all moving gently in the welcome breeze coming off the ocean. Only two of the tables were filled, both with two men each, all in their thirties or forties, relaxing with drinks, probably with the rest of their families out on the beach or in the arcades. They stood at the top of the steps for a moment before a young woman with a high ponytail bobbing behind her approached and welcomed them. They refused menus, and she led them to one of the prime tables, against the front railing, overlooking the Boardwalk.

They took their seats in the shade of a massive umbrella, and the server took drink orders and disappeared. After sitting for a moment, all of them taking in the view, Peter spoke, "Everything else aside, it's really good to be sitting here with you right now." It wasn't a line. From the time he spotted them coming onto the Boardwalk, he'd felt a warmth being around his old friends. They'd seen each other at the funeral, but that had been a funeral. This was more the type of reunion he didn't realize was so important to him: sitting with his friends, enjoying the sunshine, in their old stomping grounds. This was special.

"I agree," Tim said first, which he didn't expect. "Been too long."

Scott nodded in agreement.

"Bring back memories?"

"I live here, Peter," Scott said, with some bite to it.

"Well, yeah," he said. "But do you ever come here? Do you ever stop and take in this view? The beach? The ocean? It's wonderful."

"What did you want to talk about, Peter?" Strangely, it was Scott wanting to get down to business.

He held up a finger. "Hold on a second. I'm here with my friends after forty years, which I'm very excited about. I know there's other stuff going on, but let's take a few minutes to enjoy it."

There was a quick moment of silence that Peter feared would turn into an awkward one, but it ebbed quickly, Scott nodding – an admission that he, too, felt some

emotion about the three of them getting together, as well. Which presented an opportunity.

Something clicked with him, and he gazed over the railing toward the Boardwalk. "Great view from up here." He let that linger for a second before continuing. "Hey, would you humor me for a few minutes?" He looked up at them to see at best confusion, at worst reticence. He motioned with his head toward the people below. "Let's see if we've still got it. Take a look down there. Who are you targeting?"

"Really, Peter?"

He held up his hands. "Come on, Timmy," he goaded. "Double T... Just for fun."

Tim sighed, then peered over the side. He investigated for a minute before speaking. "I can see like four livecams from here."

Peter laughed. "For the purpose of the exercise, let's pretend it's nineteen seventy-nine."

That got both of them to snicker. It was going well.

Scott jumped in, pointing with his chin. "Easy one. The lady there with the stroller. I can tell from here that's a Coach purse. She's got three kids running around there, they're covered in melting orange custard dripping down their faces, and she's on the phone. Look at her body language. That isn't an important call. She's chatting with her sister about how dumb her husband is."

"In nineteen seventy-nine, she's not on her phone," Tim pointed out dryly.

Scott laughed and held his hands out. "What are the rules, here?"

Now, they were into it, and Peter laughed, stretching his arms to separate his friends from a brawl. "You're allowed some leeway."

They continued to faux glare at each other, though. "Purses mean keys," Tim said, deadpanned. "You want to leave her with three kids and no way to get home?"

The young woman returned with their drinks, so they clammed up for a moment, given their choice of topic. She set gin and tonics in front of Scott and Peter, and handed Tim his whiskey sour, then disappeared.

“If you notice,” Scott continued, making sustained eye contact with Tim, “every time she moves to address the kids, there’s a rock on her hand the size of the moon. That’s the target. I don’t want the purse.”

“He’s right,” Peter said, admiring his protégé’s expertise.

Tim stood his ground, then broke, laughing. “Alright. Good one.” He scanned the Boardwalk for his own intel. “Here you go. Look at that gold chain. Easy pickins.”

“Where?”

“You don’t see it? The tall guy, with the tank top and his hat backwards.”

“What color hat?” Peter asked. Neither of them saw it.

“Blue. Dark blue. Maybe Yankees?”

They spotted the man at the same time – tall, skinny Italian kid with arms covered in tattoos. Thick gold chain around his neck, dangling down to the middle of his chest. Dark, athlete’s sunglasses, and black over-ear wireless headphones. “Mister New Jersey, there,” Scott said. “Looks like he’s straight off the show. Who would wear something like that?”

“A guy trying to show a bunch of girls in bikinis how much money he has?” Tim suggested.

“Does that work? It seems pretty sad to me.” Both of them were shaking their heads with no answer, so he turned to Tim. “You think you could get that off his neck?”

“Now?”

He laughed again. “No. Back in the day. Some of those disco guys had chains at least that big.”

Tim sighed and sat back, thinking. Peter could tell that in his mind he was putting himself back in the seventies, plotting on how he’d go in for the kill. He was always the planner. If Peter was the head coach, Tim was the offensive coordinator. The implementor. Both of them waited with bated breath to hear the plan-of-attack.

After a moment, he leaned forward, his eyes focused like a hunter on the young man, oblivious to the fact that he was the center of attention. “So, the kid, from here, looks muscular. I wouldn’t want to give him the opportunity to use his arms. Tackle me, or even get a swing off once I got close.” His eyes narrowed as the man passed by their position on the Boardwalk, headed north. “He’s

got his music on, but he's alert. He knows what's going on around him. Mainly because he's looking for women, but he'd notice anything else out of the ordinary."

"We should've recruited a woman for our team," Peter said, reminiscently regretting not having done so, for the possibilities. "I always thought that."

Tim ignored the comment. "I would probably go with a Klutzy Teenager."

"Oh, that's right," Scott said. "You had names for your moves. What was that one, the Slippery Eel?"

They laughed together, Tim nodding. "Yes, that was one."

"And the Spoiled Brat."

Scott pointed across the table. "That was a good one."

"Remind me how the Klutzy Teenager worked?" Peter asked.

"Oh, easy," Tim said. "I would get into the target's vicinity and act like an asshole. They'd notice and get annoyed, and once I had their attention and they were distracted, I'd plow into them, usually taking them to the ground. I'd help them up and apologize very politely, which they'd always accept, even though they were annoyed. Another stupid kid on the Boardwalk."

"We all did that move," Scott complained. "You're the only nerd who named it, though."

Tim smiled and shrugged. "Call it a trademark. And nobody did it as well as I did."

"That's true," Peter agreed, knowing the current significance of that claim without letting on. "That's your plan for that guy?"

"Yeah. Would you do something different?"

He smiled. "I wouldn't go after that guy."

"But he's so obvious. Why not?"

"Guys like that would like nothing better than to get into a fight," Peter said, shaking his head. "He's looking forward to whatever kind of action will give him some excitement today. If he goes home with a woman or a story of how he was a manly man today, he's happy. You tackle him, he'll chase you down and beat the shit out of you, even before he notices you stole from him. Just for the sport of it."

They locked eyes for a good minute before Tim let a smile cross his face. “Agree to disagree.”

Peter laughed and took a sip from his drink, which apparently was enough of a pause to allow Scott to bring the conversation back around. As he started to seek out his own target downstairs, he was interrupted.

“That was fun, but why’d you call us here, Peter?”

He turned back to the table and regrouped, taking a deep breath. “I called *you*,” he corrected.

“But you have *us*. Why?”

He took another sip from his drink, then leaned in. “This is all going downhill,” he started. “You have to understand, I started this with the best of intentions. It wasn’t about the gold. It wasn’t about the money. It was for finality. For us. For Randy. To resurrect something that was important to all of us before it’s all over.”

“We never asked that of you,” Scott rebuffed.

He waved his hand. “I know that. But even though you never asked... I did promise it to you. And I’m a man of my word.”

“Well, you’re released from it.” Strangely, Scott was doing the talking.

He shook his head. “Doesn’t work that way.” Scott started to say something else, but he stopped him. “But... I know when I’ve lost when I see it. I can admit it. And I’ve lost.”

“So, you’ve got your finality,” Scott pointed out.

“In a way, I guess.”

“Where do things stand now?” Tim leaned into the conversation, earnest in his voice.

“My attorney tells me that people are contacting the mayor’s office from all over the country to claim things. He says about thirty percent of the items have been legitimately claimed. Anyone making a claim has to provide concrete proof of ownership, and the judge’s decision on whether or not it’s legitimate is final.”

“Is there a web page or somewhere where you can see all the items?” Tim asked.

“No, actually,” he said, “which I thought was a pretty smart move by the judge. Because that would attract all kinds of attention. Doctored photos and what-not. People have to know they had something stolen that year, and

they have to know exactly what it is. Which works for us, because I think there will be a good percentage of the items leftover at the-

"We don't want the stuff, Peter," Scott said. "Tim and I talked about it. If there's anything left, we're not keeping it."

He held up a finger. "That's one of the things I wanted to talk to you about today. I think whatever's left, we should liquidate it and give the proceeds to Shelley."

Scott was shaking his head. "We talked to Shelley, too." Randy's widow. "She doesn't want anything to do with it, either."

Now, Peter sat back in his chair, for the first time leaving the enjoyment of being reconnected with his friends, and instead feeling the intense heat of the afternoon. He noticed the sweat that had been pouring down his back inside his shirt all along. "What do you mean?"

"I mean none of us are going to keep a penny of it."

He looked back and forth between them, incredulous. "So, what's your plan?"

"Give it back to Seaside," Scott said, without emotion.

"To Seaside? To Ebel? Not a chance."

"No, not to Ebel. To the boro. To the people we stole it from."

"It's the right thing to do, Peter," Tim weighed in.

He sat back in his chair again, the wind knocked completely from his sails. "I don't get it."

Scott leaned in to follow him. "You just gave us this big speech about how it's not about the money. So, stand behind that."

"You can do whatever you want with your portion," Tim said. "But we're in agreement."

He looked at Scott. "You talked to Ebel," he said, not asked. "You're working with him."

"I am not," he said, noticeably only answering the second question.

Letting out a deep, demonstrative sigh, he said, "You're tying my hands here."

"If you choose to see it that way."



Peter stared down at the Boardwalk for a moment, watching people pass by. He realized he was yearning for the conversation they'd been having only moments before. This was unexpected. He'd thought he could talk them into giving the money to Randy's family. It made sense, and it was an easy solution. Giving the money instead to that moron Ebel made his blood boil, but they were forcing him into it.

Emotional, he leaned back into the table. "Guys, I need a victory here. My life—"

"You have a victory," Scott said. "Not only did you bring finality to the situation, but you've honored Randy by returning important items to people who'd lost them long ago. You've changed the narrative from four teenage criminals who hurt a lot of people to four rambunctious teenagers who are sorry for the things they did, and want to make things right. How can that not be considered a victory?"

Scott was sold on this. Peter could do nothing but glare at him and steam inside. Of course, they were recommending a more noble path forward. But, in doing so, they were taking away from him the last bit of control he had over the situation. It wasn't sitting well.

"I put my life in danger over this," he said, knowing even mentioning it was an act of desperation.

"How so?" Scott said, with a hint of eye roll.

He leaned closer, over their now-empty glasses. "You don't know what's going on?" Both looked at him blankly. "Sometime that summer, one of us stole a watch from Vincent Scazzafava, who was visiting the Boardwalk with his family. When Scazzafava—"

"Didn't he die the other day?" Tim asked.

"He did, yes. When Scazzafava learned about the cache of gold, he contacted Ebel about it. They gave him his watch back, which then kicked off this whole nationwide search, which is one thing. But my understanding is that before he died, he wanted names, and he wanted blood. Since I'm the only one out there..."

"You've got a target on your back," Tim finished his sentence. "But he died."

"And I don't know where that leaves us. We could be done with it, or it might just have started. His son is in

town. Today. Literally just walked right past this spot with the mayor. I watched them.”

There was a long pause, as they all considered what could be next. Scott broke the silence. “Shit, Peter... I’m a helluva lot more scared now than I was about some bad publicity.”

“I know,” he said, nodding. “But the public doesn’t know about all of us yet, and I’ll do my best to keep it that way. Plus, before he died, apparently he was convinced I was the culprit, and I’m okay with that.”

“You weren’t?” Scott asked.

He shook his head. “Nope. Wasn’t me.”

“A watch, you said?”

“I remember it. Big gold one. Might even have been the most valuable thing we got all summer.” Was Tim squirming in his chair? Peter didn’t want to look right at him and be obvious, but he thought so. The Klutzy Teenager. Would it change his perspective on giving the money to Ebel? Hard to tell. “Doesn’t matter. I’ll deal with it.”

“You’ll deal with it.”

He held up his hands, calming. “First and foremost, we need to know the realities. Did the old man dying change anything? I will find that out as soon as I can. Beyond that, the only people who have seen the photo with us in it is the court, our side, and Ebel. Apparently, Scazzafava asked Ebel to help him find me, and he could’ve sent him right to my hotel room if he wanted. I’m taking that to mean that as much as he can’t stand me, he wants no part of that side of all of this. The better this all goes – and it sounds like you guys are leaning toward making this good for him – I don’t see any reason that would change.” He looked at Scott. “You apparently now have a relationship with him, so maybe you can solidify that.”

Scott sighed, looking down at the table. “Why did your attorney visit Shelley?”

“What?” Peter asked, confused. “He hasn’t talked to Shelley. He doesn’t even-”

“Starr went to Shelley’s house this morning. Sounds like he left the court and went right there. She didn’t let him in, but he asked her about her intentions.”

“I knew we should’ve gotten her signature ahead of time, too,” Tim jumped in.

“Well, she’ll definitely sign now.”

“That’s who you were on the phone with before?” Peter had picked up on tension, but had no reason to believe it was related. “Why would he do that?”

“You didn’t know?” Scott was looking at him sternly, admonishing him. Peter’s guess was that he wouldn’t believe his answer, either way. “You might want to have a talk with him.”

He looked to both of his friends, back and forth. Tim avoided eye contact, but he was not happy. “I guess I should,” he said slowly. He would have to investigate. “You couldn’t have just put that on the table at the beginning? Now, I feel like a fool, going into all this other stuff. That’s important.”

“Shelley’s good,” Scott said. “Just make sure it doesn’t happen again.”

With almost every one of his paths forward blocked, and winning scenarios becoming murkier in his mind, Peter couldn’t come up with a response.

That wasn’t a position he liked to be in, and would have to do something about, despite his playbook thinning.

## CHAPTER 31

The envelope sat on Martin's dining room table, taunting him.

He hadn't really looked at it when Scazzafava had handed it to him, but now that he could focus on it without seeming like a political neophyte, it was even thicker than he'd imagined. Probably an inch thick in the middle, with the sides tapered down – the bulge clearly the shape of personal checks.

Why hadn't he opened it? Not because he was worried about what was inside. But because he didn't know what to do with what he knew was inside. He felt in a bind. In no way could he disappoint his powerful new friend by not adding whatever resources they'd stuffed into the envelope into his campaign. But local candidates were required to file their financial reports at the beginning of October, about a month before Election Day, and that kind of additional money would raise eyebrows going into the final weeks of the campaign. Was he talented enough to spin the newfound support? He wasn't sure.

He hadn't taken the envelope from his pocket until he'd gotten home – even after they'd returned to the office, and the two of them had inspected the new furniture while the crew graciously ate their lunch. Martin had to stifle a laugh, walking into his office, which had transformed from a small town, pragmatic working space into a DC law firm. A regal, dark cherrywood desk sat in the middle of the room with matching bookcases lining the wall to the right, stocked with his books that had been

mildly organized on top of filing cabinets and shelves previously. His new chair almost put him to sleep when he sunk into the soft leather, and he envisioned the official conversations he'd have with visitors sitting in similar chairs across from him. Fortunately, for business' sake, the ensemble was completed by something he'd never wanted to spend boro money on – a visitors' table and chairs for small, private meetings.

The reception office was similarly extravagantly decked, and almost looked out of place with the rest of Boro Hall, an older building without frills. Martin knew he was going to have to step up his game as far as the perception of the power of the office for anyone who came in, given the ambience. He also knew that as soon as Sanderson-Cox found out about the new furniture, which had certainly already happened, there would be a new campaign issue to deal with.

Which was another reason why he hadn't opened the envelope. He was having an overload of things he was going to need to deal with for the next nine weeks or so before the election.

He decided to leave the questions, and change his focus for a few minutes, pouring himself a whiskey and having a seat at the far end of the table from the envelope, in front of a stack of e-mails he'd had Abby print out for him. They were inquiries from the social media ads and newspaper articles about the items that Blythe and his team had stolen. For his own interests, Martin wanted to go through each one, which he had from the beginning, before turning them over the judge. He knew that part of it was his obsession for sticking it to Blythe so badly that he was going to play the role of advocate for any requests that didn't seem to exactly fit the criteria. To the point where he didn't care if they made some mistakes: he wanted that safe emptied.

One, in particular, had caught his eye – a woman who'd written in saying that she'd had her engagement ring taken right off of her finger by a teenager who'd run into her on the Boardwalk while she and her fiancé of only a few days were watching the July 4 fireworks. Out of all of the stories he'd seen, it was the most heartbreaking, as the woman's husband had died in a car accident just a few

years ago, and when her daughter had heard of Martin's quest, she'd flown immediately to her home in Bradenton and gone through every family photo they had to find any evidence of the priceless treasure she'd been in possession of for no more than a week.

The printed e-mail at the top of the pile, which Martin picked up to read again, was actually the fourth that Theresa Peterson's daughter, Miranda, had sent, as they kept finding more photos. If there was any clear evidence that someone had rights to something in the safe, it was this family. Unfortunately, the engagement ring she was describing, and that was in the photos, was not included among the pieces in the collection. After the third e-mail, he'd inquired with Petrelli's staff to try again, which they did, but yielded nothing. Now, a fourth, with another scanned picture, a Polaroid, with Mrs. Peterson and her then-fiancé having dinner – one of those photos that happens when the waiter sees the camera on the table and offers to snap a picture. The image, even the scan of a forty-year-old photo, was clear. He could see the ring. But it still didn't match anything he'd seen, with a marquise-shaped diamond, probably a carat-and-a-half, surrounded by a ring of small baguettes. Beautiful ring that must've cost a pretty penny – while from his upbringing, Martin knew diamond rings, even if he hadn't had the opportunity in his life to investigate them for his own relationship use.

But sadly, it just wasn't in the safe. Which, to Martin meant that either Blythe's team had hocked it before they gave up or, given that it was actually stolen, there was some other story afoot altogether. He considered copycat pickpockets and any number of other explanations, but it broke his heart that he couldn't find a solution for her.

Setting the paper back down, he sat back in his dining room chair and sighed, his attention drawn to the stack of photos that had been returned to him by the court. That Mrs. Peterson's daughter was so hell-bent on hunting down proof of her mother's lost ring that she uprooted herself and spent days probably sitting on the floor going through boxes stung him about his own failure to fulfill his father's request. Add to that Vinny Scazzafava Jr.

making a personal trip to his office to bring him new furniture because it was important to his father, and Martin was suddenly aware that he needed to refocus his priorities. Not as a politician running a losing race, not even as a son, but as a person.

Standing, he walked over to the credenza and picked up a box at random, bringing it back to the table. No label, so it would be a surprise as to what era of his father's life he was digging into. The first few photos showed beaches and blue sky, which he identified as near his last home near West Palm. That was confirmed when he came across a slew of photos he remembered his dad had taken of an incoming hurricane – he couldn't remember which one. Very dramatic photos that brought back some memories of talking with him on the phone about it. There was one summer where a handful of hurricanes approached or hit Florida, but then, as they do, turned northward and went towards him in New Jersey, so they'd traded off calling to check in with each other. Alone in his dining room, he laughed, thinking about it.

Glancing back to the email from Mrs. Peterson's daughter, he made a note to follow up with the court again. He wasn't going to let this one lie.

Into the photos now, and pleased with his own enthusiasm, he stood and went to the kitchen counter, pulling the whiskey bottle back to the table with him. Grabbing another stack of 5"x7"s from the box, he began shuffling through them.

## CHAPTER 32

Martin saw her enter council chambers the moment she walked in. He knew she was here for the public comment period that would follow the council meeting – Miranda Sanderson-Cox wouldn't have shown up otherwise. What she would say was something unknown, though, and he immediately searched his brain to see if *Robert's Rules of Order* would possibly give him a way to keep her quiet.

They didn't, of course, so he tried to just push his concerns to the back of his mind and focus on running the council meeting. Though, he couldn't help but peeking in her direction occasionally to gauge her level of smugness. There were still more than two months until the election, and while he felt like he was definitely on an upswing, he was well aware that she was capable of counterstrikes as they went along. They hadn't polled, but the vibe told him the race was getting closer. She was about to make her next move.

Fortunately, he had an ace in the hole now, that he would hang onto until as close to the end as he could. The entire Peter Blythe situation had driven him into his father's photos, and he'd found a treasure trove of Seaside Heights history – a collection that would make for a fantastic marketing push in the coming weeks. Add a super positive spin to what had already become an abnormally exciting summer.

He would have to deal with whatever she had up her sleeve first, though. Unfortunately, sitting across from her



was Brianna McDaniel, her pen and notepad ready to record. While she was a regular visitor to the council meetings as part of her job, she didn't come to every one. There was nothing on today's agenda that should have attracted her, so he was certain Sanderson-Cox had invited her.

He took his attention away from the big campaign to move onto the next order of business on the agenda – a zoning variance being requested by Salem's Deli on West Central Avenue near the northern end of the borough, who wanted to dig up a small grassy area on the side of their building and add three parking spots. Salem's owner, Dale Chatham, grandson of the founder, who Martin knew well, was appearing before the council to make his plea, which had some opposition from two of Chatham's neighbors.

"Next item is the requested zoning variance for Salem's Deli on West Central," he announced to the room, which held a smattering of Seaside residents. "Dale Chatham is here to present." He waited a moment for Chatham, in his forties, but greying beyond his age – perhaps due somewhat to the current situation – to make his way to the microphone. "Mister Chatham?"

"Thank you, Mayor," the man said, leaning in toward the microphone, clutching a pile of papers to his chest. "I'm here today for an update to my request that was filed with the council in April, and for which I appeared in May. I've spoken to my neighbors and decided to..."

Martin lost interest, thinking about Sanderson-Cox in the back of the room. At this point, Chatham's request seemed insignificant. Davis Jamieson was friends with one of the neighbors, some connection through the kids playing hockey together, and the woman had been in his ear since day one. Yes, about three parking spots on someone else's property. Jamieson by no means was going to go the mattresses for his friend – he'd told Martin personally – but he'd committed to at least be a hindrance. Put up "the good fight." Pointless, but Martin got it. Fortunately, the request was expected to be approved five-to-one, so he didn't have to pay too much attention, since the mayor only voted in the event a tiebreaker was needed.

Chatham must've finished his short presentation, because Jamieson was leaning in to the microphone. "Mister Chatham, what did you settle on for the signage?"

The man let out a breath that was audible into the microphone. Clearly, he'd been pushed around by his neighbor, and Jamieson's question was an insult. "At the request of Mrs. Palmieri, we've included her address on the sign. Her visitors are able to park there."

"That was very accommodating of you."

Martin looked at his colleague. Why was he haranguing him? Must be some inside baseball he didn't know about. He let a smirk cross his face, because he knew that Jamieson's personality wouldn't normally be so in-your-face, so Chatham must have said something along the way that irked him.

"We did add a twenty-minute time limit," Chatham continued. "Mrs. Palmieri and I have an understanding, though, that it's not an extra parking spot for their house. Her son is turning sixteen soon, and I could see that coming a mile away."

"Understood," Jamieson said, leaning back and nodding to Martin that he was finished.

Martin scanned the rest of the councilmembers to see if there were additional questions and, seeing none, called the vote. Jamieson ended up voting to support, and Chatham walked away from the microphone with his parking spots and a little bit of remaining dignity.

To his dismay, Martin looked down at the agenda to see that the boro business was done, and the next item was the public comment period. To his right, Abigail approached and handed him the sign-in sheet that she'd collected from the back of the room. The only name on it was Miranda Sanderson-Cox. She gave him a knowing look, part empathy, part frustration.

Putting on a bit of a show, he nodded at Abigail and set the page on the desk in front of him. He leaned in slightly to the microphone. "It's time for public comment. We have one person who's signed up to speak, Miranda Sanderson-Cox. If you didn't have the opportunity to sign up, and would like to speak, please form a single file line behind Ms. Cox." His opponent made her way to the

microphone positioned between the two aisles of seats. “Ms. Cox?”

He thought for a moment about giving her a warning to not make this a campaign speech, but she was going to anyway, and it would just come across as petty. She’d shown up. Signed up. The rules allowed her to say what she had to say.

“Thank you, Mister Mayor,” she began, politely. No notes. “I’ll be brief. Over the past several weeks now, Seaside Heights has been enraptured by an adventure forty years in the making – a story seemingly coming out of Hollywood. A disco-era crime spree. A buried treasure. Legal and social ramifications. I don’t know that our esteemed mayor could have written a better script, himself, going into his upcoming election. I give him much credit for taking something that was a black eye on our history, and turning it into positive attention for our lovely community.”

He was already getting annoyed, and regretted not saying anything. She was not addressing the council, but the audience sitting behind her, turning her body to the left and right as she made her points.

“That all of this would happen during Mayor Ebel’s tenure would appear to many to be circumstantial. But, what has not been yet made public yet is that there’s a much stronger connection.” He perked up. “Recently, the mayor’s office ran a social media campaign to reconnect people who’d had valuables stolen during the infamous pickpocket ring of nineteen seventy-nine – which my sources tell me has been a highly successful endeavor. Congratulations, Mister Mayor. However... The images used for that campaign, which were very good for Seaside Heights from a historical perspective, and I hope that the mayor will think about releasing them to the public at some point, were from a collection taken by Mayor Ebel’s father, himself, Richard Ebel, in the seventies.”

Nothing out of the ordinary so far, though he tried to trace the web in his mind of how she would know. Prior to this situation, he hadn’t gone out of his way to hide the fact that he had his father’s photos, while not brandishing them, so it was possible that she knew just from scuttlebutt.

Though he had a sense Blythe had something to do with it.

He decided to jump in, though. "Excuse me, Ms. Cox, if I could ask you to address the council, rather than the crowd."

She stopped for a moment, disrupting her flow, and smiled at him. "Of course, Mister Mayor." Now, she positioned her feet toward directly toward the front of the room, and adjusted the microphone to her height level. "Members of the council..." The tone of her voice was different as she began, and Martin realized immediately he'd fallen right into her trap. She wanted the formality, and she wanted him to ask her for it. Damn.

"... It has come to my attention that among the photos from Mayor Ebel's father's collection – those not released to the public yet, and I'm told there are thousands of them – are photos of the actual perpetrators in the pickpocket ring."

Martin heard some murmuring in the crowd, and could feel a councilmember or two looking at him. He didn't return the glance, his eyes fixated on his opponent.

"In fact," she said, "apparently some of these photos were used as evidence in court to support Peter Blythe's claim that the items found in the sand actually belonged to him." She paused, letting the din subside. "Now, what does this mean? I can't say – that's not my bailiwick – but if Mayor Ebel's father knew that these young men were stealing from people, enough so that he was photo documenting it, it would seem that he was complicit in the crimes being committed."

Martin couldn't help but glance toward the back of the room where McDaniel sat. Her head was down, and she was writing.

The people in the room started chattering again, and Martin let it go on for a moment. Sanderson-Cox was approaching her three-minute time limit that was rarely enforced, but he legitimately could put a lid on her comments. However, with what she'd just dropped on them, it would be bad form. He had no choice but to let her continue, so he tapped his gavel to quiet the crowd. Which they did, hungry for the rest of the story.

“However, I happen to have one of the photos here, which was forwarded to me,” she brought her phone up and showed it to the councilmembers, and then the crowd, though it was too small to really see anything. “This isn’t an action shot. This isn’t some journalistic capturing of crime in action. This is four criminals, standing on the beach, posing for a shot, presumably showing off valuables that they’d just stolen from people on the Boardwalk above. Now, I don’t know what you read into this, but it certainly appears as though Richard Ebel didn’t just know what was going on and didn’t say anything, but you could easily surmise that he might have actually been involved with the pickpockets.”

The people in the room erupted – at least, as much as a dozen attendees could possibly erupt. Martin kept his focus on the woman attacking him, or, his father, working his mind for a plan while trying not to let his face show that he was strategizing. But, it was coming clear to him that she’d won this round, and the best thing he could do was demonstrate that it didn’t faze him.

“Ms. Cox,” he said loudly but calmly into the microphone, over the noise in the room, “Did you come here today to give a speech, or did you have business before the council?”

“Thank you, Mister Mayor,” she said, dripping with faux congeniality. “I would like to request that the council investigate the matter, and that the full collection of photos be released to the public.”

Now, Martin allowed himself a glance down the table toward his colleagues on the council, receiving an array of looks, from confusion to anger to frustration. He tried with his eyes to answer all of them simultaneously, knowing he was failing.

Looking out to the room, Martin could see the attendees were starting to get out of their seats as the noise grew, and knew he had to end it, one way or another. He took a gamble, leaning in to the microphone. “May I have a motion to adjourn?” he asked, hoping one of his closer colleagues would take the bait.

“So moved,” Melanie Peterson agreed with him.

“All in favor?” Martin continued the process as they continued to lose control of the room.

For the first time in his career, he saw a motion to adjourn not be approved unanimously. Three said “aye,” the others were silent, forcing him to ask who was opposed. Three hands went up. They wanted more information. But, for only the third time in his entire term as mayor, he was the deciding vote, and he was ending the meeting. “The vote carries four-to-three. The meeting is adjourned.”

As attendees, including McDaniel, flooded toward Sanderson-Cox, the councilmembers moved toward Martin, gathering around him. He could see his opponent not wanting to be bothered with the people, far more interested in what was being said up on the dais, and gazing in that direction.

“Hold on, everyone,” he said to the council members, all wanting a piece of him. He looked to the right and spotted Naomi Grey still sitting calmly, as she had been the entire time, and motioned to her that he needed her. He held up a finger to the councilmembers, who let him retreat to the side for a moment to conference with the boro’s attorney. “That went well, huh? Did you see that coming?”

She shook her head. “Obviously, Blythe is giving her information.”

“And she’s giving it to the media,” he agreed, nodding toward Sanderson-Cox, who was now talking with McDaniel. “She could’ve done it a little less dramatically.”

“That’s not her style. What’s up?”

He returned his focus to the forefront. “I want to talk to the council. Is there a way I can without invoking the Sunshine Law?” In New Jersey, it was illegal to gather a governmental body together without allowing the media or public inside – unless there was a specific legal reason to do so. Martin had never before had to invoke a Sunshine Law exception, but in his amateur legal thinking, he felt like this one could work.

Grey thought for a moment, then nodded. “I believe so. Given the court order about the photo, which has now been shared with the public – something I’ll have to investigate – and the fact that your father, despite the fact that statute of limitations expired a long time ago, is being

implicated, there should be legal coverage for you to meet with the councilmembers. What are you going to tell them?"

"I'm going to fill them in on everything."

"You think that's a good idea?"

He looked around. "Cat's out of the bag now."

She was thinking. "One of them – *at least* one of them – is working with her, you know." She motioned with her head toward Sanderson-Cox.

"Yes, I'm sure of it. I just have to hope their sense of responsibility supersedes their political proclivities."

"Fat chance."

That caught him off guard, and he stifled a snicker. "Okay, I'm going to gather them in fifteen minutes. You're welcome to sit in. But can you make sure that she doesn't show up at the room with a court order to let her in?"

"No," she was thinking, "... I mean, yes. I will do that. I don't think she will, though. The court order would have to go through Petrelli, and the last thing she wants right now is to have to explain to the judge how she got a photo that was supposed to be confidential. She'll talk to the media. She'll keep it vague, but accusatory. And she'll go home after this."

"What about McDaniel?"

"Well, just don't make it obvious that you're gathering everyone. Start there."

Martin nodded, then turned back to the team of councilmembers.

"We have questions," Jamieson asked.

"I'm sure you do. I'll answer them." He leaned in to Jamieson's ear. "Have everyone in Conference Room A in fifteen minutes. I'll be there."

Jamieson pulled back and looked at him for a moment, then past him at Grey, realizing what she and Martin had been talking about. He nodded, just as Martin heard McDaniel calling him from just below the dais.

He turned to meet her, stepping away from the councilmembers as they dispersed.

"Mister Mayor," she said, holding out her hands, her pen in one, notebook in the other. "Anything to add?"

He motioned her to the side, and stepped down from the dais, taking a seat in the first row as the crowd continued to mingle around them. He noticed Sanderson-Cox had left the room, guerrilla-style, as McDaniel joined him, sitting two seats away.

“There’s a very important piece of the story,” he started, “and that’s that the photo she showed up there is under court order to be kept confidential. I don’t know how she got it, but that’s something you might want to look into. I’d start with Judge Petrelli.”

She motioned with her pen hand. “All of the others are okay? But that particular photo was not supposed to get out?”

He shook his head. “It’s not my order. I’d rather not comment on why.”

McDaniel let out a sigh. He could see it in her eyes. She knew she had work to do, and the answers weren’t going to come easy.

For Martin, there was no way he was going to go into the whole story about Scazzafava and Blythe and why showing that photo to the public could be dangerous. That would add a whole new level to the situation, and the last thing he wanted to do was alienate his new friend, Vinny Jr. She might be able to make the connection somewhere along the way, but it wasn’t going to be through him.

“Anything you want to say about your father’s involvement?”

He laughed off her question, intentionally. “My dad spent his summers walking around the beach taking photos of everything. He didn’t care what. It was about the photography. He didn’t sell the photos. He didn’t put them in a calendar. He just took them because he loved taking pictures. Might he have caught some things he could’ve used? Sure. I remember when I was a teenager, he told me a story of how he was taking photos one day, and two girls came up to him and asked if they’d take a picture of them topless...” He stopped. “I’m sorry – I hope I’m not being insensitive.” She shook her head. “He shrugged and said whatever, or whatever they said in the seventies, and they flashed him, and he took the photo. I



remember, as a teenage boy, that sounded like the greatest thing that could ever happen to a guy. But he was super blasé about it, and somewhere in the massive collection of photos is a picture of two random girls on the beach flashing my dad.”

“You haven’t found that one?”

He laughed. “Still looking.” Fortunately, she laughed with him. “But, no, it doesn’t surprise me that he might’ve taken photos of some random crime on the Boardwalk, and just tucked them back into his archives. The Blythe thing probably isn’t the only time that happened.”

“The fact that they were posing for the picture doesn’t raise any red flags for you?”

“A bunch of cocky teenage boys showing off when they see a camera?” He shook his head. “You’ve been to Seaside Heights, right?”

She smiled. “I have.” She thought for a moment. “So, Judge Petrelli?”

“I’d start there.”

“Okay. Thank you, Mayor.” She started to get up, but stopped, turning to him. “That thing with the parking spaces?”

“Just two neighbors who don’t get along. Nothing really of interest.”

“Somebody said something about drugs behind the deli?”

He shook his head, smiling, knowing that came from Mrs. Palmieri. “Nothing ever reported to the police. I think it might’ve been made up to gain some leverage. Dale runs a pretty tight ship over there. Feel free to look it up, but I don’t think there’s much of a story there.”

She nodded, then turned and walked down the middle aisle and out the rear doors of the room.

Martin looked back to the dais to see that the councilmembers were gone. His internal clock told him he had about eight minutes to figure out what he was going to say to them.

Wanting to avoid any lingering constituents, he turned and snuck out the side door to the room, retreating to the sanctity of his newly elegant office to collect himself.

\*\*\*

“The bottom line remains that you shouldn’t have kept us in the dark, Martin,” Jamieson said. His primary ally on the council, unfortunately.

He wasn’t wrong, but Martin couldn’t figure out a way that he could’ve made it work. With Petrelli’s oversight of the situation, the secrecy behind his plan, and the underbelly of North Jersey involved, what could he possibly have said to them?

“You have to understand,” he said, backing away to his safety zone, “the judge put orders on what could be public or not. I filled all of you in on the social media program, and the deal that we’d struck to give thirty days. Anything beyond that, I wasn’t authorized to talk about.”

The councilmembers, all six of them, were sitting around the small conference table that was most often used for vendors pitching their services to the boro. Maps of Seaside Heights lined one wall, with photos of the Boardwalk on the other. Martin stood, leaning against a whiteboard at the front of the room, allowing himself to be a viable target for them.

“Despite being right in the middle of it,” Kelly Hanover, council president and one of the three he suspected might be working with Sanderson-Cox, said. Hanover, pristine and buttoned-up in public, had loosed the snappy red bow she’d been wearing around her neck, and her long brown hair was hanging over her left shoulder. She was in get-down-to-business mode. “You should have at least come clean on that. We’ve got new furniture showing up at your office...”

“You have to admit that it looks at least a little bit suspicious,” Jamieson said.

“I told you, Davis... The furniture was neither solicited nor expected. I have all the paperwork, and can show you. Vincent Scazzafava was grateful that he got his watch back, so he made a contribution to the boro. What was I going to say, sitting there in my broken chair, with furniture guys standing outside holding a desk? No?” In the back of his mind, of course, he was wondering how he’d explain away the envelope full of campaign checks that he’d ultimately

have to put into his bank account. That would be later, but it was still a bridge he would need to cross.

“Well, we need to do what she said,” offered Angela Brindisi, the longest-tenured of all the council members, and a *public* supporter of Martin’s opponent. She’d hosted a living room fundraiser for Sanderson-Cox in May, right after her kickoff. “We need to do an investigation.”

“Into what?” Jamieson asked, stupefied.

“Into Martin’s father’s involvement.”

They engaged in an eye contact standoff without speaking, everyone else silent. Martin couldn’t decide if Jamieson was preparing to defend him, or if he was simply incredulous about the silliness of the idea altogether. Because it was ridiculous, even from Martin’s biased point of view.

“Into Martin’s father’s involvement,” Jamieson repeated, with scorn. “So, we – the boro of Seaside Heights city council – are going to, from a random photo, determine someone’s involvement in a crime from forty years ago?”

“It seems we need to try.”

“I’ll tell you what, Angela,” Jamieson pressed his finger on the table with frustration, as if he was pounding the nuclear button, “you go design that investigation and bring your ideas back to us for our next meeting. The rest of us will work on something productive.” He turned to Martin. “We can sit here and spin our wheels all day. What’s the next move?”

Martin pulled himself away from the wall and leaned on the open end of the table, satisfied that Brindisi wouldn’t be interjecting anymore. That was her foray into turning the council into a campaign platform for Sanderson-Cox, likely using talking points that had been provided to her. “We have about a week left for people to make claims on their valuables. My guess is that we won’t get many more. There was a flood of people coming in at the beginning, and then it started to die down. We can only reach so far.”

“What happens then?” Melanie Peterson asked.

“Well, according to the judge – and, again, I hope I’m not talking out of school, because I’ll get slapped for it –

but it seems that Blythe's claim on the items in the cache is legitimate." Some of them started to murmur, but he held up his hands. "No, I get it. It makes no sense at all. We've already been through it with the judge. But... There's a bright spot, in that some of the other men in the photo have come forward, and have expressed their intent to *not* take their share of the items."

"Who are the other men in the photo?" Sam Pinzino asked.

"That... Is definitely something I cannot talk about," Martin said.

"We'll know as soon as the paper prints the photo," Peterson said.

Martin smiled. "Well, let's let that play out. If information is going to get out, it's not going to come from me."

An awkward pause followed, as they all accepted that they weren't going to get that information out of him. For Martin, whatever he'd just done had been successful, as it had sucked the energy and animosity out of the conversation. For a moment, at least.

"What happens then?" Jamieson asked, soft-spoken.

"Actually, I'm not quite sure," he said, just as his phone buzzed on the table in front of him. He glanced down to see Naomi Grey's name on the screen for a moment before it disappeared. "That's going to be up to the judge. I assure you, the situation is out of the boro's control. My approach from the beginning has been to try to put a positive marketing spin on everything that's being thrown at us. I think we've been able to do that with the outreach." He paused, noticing Brindisi visibly roll her eyes at his assertion, but then added, "Based on the response."

"So, the request from Miranda?" Pinzino asked.

"You tell me," Martin said, looking around the room. "If you want to take it up, we can add it to the next meeting agenda."

The group looked at each other, stymied, no one wanting to take the lead after Brandisi had been ridiculed. It wasn't atypical of the council members to back down quickly, and Martin felt a surge of authority.

“Why don’t we table the idea until we can get some clarity from the court? Good?”

Martin’s suggestion seemed reasonable to the consensus, and they ended the meeting. He was sure that each of them had plenty to say, but no one wanted to talk in everyone else’s presence. Lots of interests at play in the room there, and now he had a much better sense of who might talk once outside the room.

Given his first chance, he picked up his phone and inspected it. It was a text:

**PETRELLI WANTS EVERYONE IN HER OFFICE IN THE MORNING, 8 A.M.**

No surprise. Brianna McDaniel had delivered his message.

Martin wondered what this most recent roll of the dice would yield.

## CHAPTER 33

Judge Petrelli held up her copy of the *Asbury Park Press*, hot off the presses. It wasn't every day that Seaside Heights landed on the front page, above the fold, but there they were – McDaniel's story on the treasure unearthed from beneath the Boardwalk.

"This does not make me happy," she said, her glare diminishing everyone in the room, regardless of which side they were on.

For Peter, it was his first official visit back to the area, his meeting with Scott and Tim notwithstanding. Starr had let the judge's office know that he was back in town the day before, and had filled her in on the backstory with the Scazzafava family, indicating that while he wanted to cooperate, they would like to try to keep his presence in town under wraps. The judge had been amenable. But the appearance of the photo in public at the boro council meeting the evening before had definitely changed her demeanor.

Also called to the meeting were Ebel, Grey, Starr, Scott and Petrelli's clerk, Rob Little. Tim was requested, but couldn't be there at short notice – he offered to call in, if he was needed. Since Scott and Tim were the ones who had least wanted the photo to be made public, Petrelli didn't insist, leaving Peter to wonder if she had the power to actually force him to drive down from Connecticut.

"While, at my request, the press did not include the photo of Mister Blythe and his friends, it's not out in the public. I believe the people in this room are the only ones

who knew of this photo's existence before yesterday evening. Can anyone explain to me how it got into Miranda Sanderson-Cox's phone, so that she could show it at the council meeting?"

The parties all exchanged innocent glances – most able to do so because they were, indeed innocent. Peter, however, knew exactly how she got the photo, but had plausible deniability because it hadn't come from him. He'd never wanted the photo to be made public. In fact, an enterprising third party had been involved.

"No one?" She looked around the room like a teacher admonishing her class, but received only silence and aversive eyes. "Then, I have no choice but to put an end to this. Rob, everything goes in the safe, and stays there until I say to release it. Mayor, please end your ad campaign immediately. I'd like to see you all back here at ten a.m. tomorrow morning, and I'll have my decision on how to settle everything. Mister Starr, I'm going to leave it to you to communicate with Mister Turner and Mrs. Helfrick. If possible, I'd like them to be here."

"I'll see what I can do, Your Honor," Starr affirmed.

\*\*\*

Martin left Petrelli's chambers in more of a hurry than he wanted to show, but the call now had his attention. Given the morning's news story, a lengthy voicemail left from a Trenton, NJ phone number could only mean one thing – and it was the last thing he needed right now.

He walked down the hall a dozen paces, away from everyone, and put the phone to his ear.

"Martin, this is Governor Devereaux," came the voice he was expecting. "I saw your news this morning. Looks like things are getting a little out of hand. It's very important to us that this ends up going in the right direction. I'm sending down my chief-of-staff tomorrow to offer you some assistance. I think you've met Kenneth. He'll be at your office nine, nine-thirty. Hopefully, adding the governor's weight to the situation can be of help to you. Any questions, let Brenda know."

The phone clicked off, and Martin knew exactly what was happening. The lead role in situation was being taken away from him. There was a press opportunity here for the governor to swoop in and be a hero, which would help her in a part of the state where she wasn't particularly popular. Thinking about it, Martin wondered why she hadn't made the move already.

Grey caught up to him, and could clearly see displeasure on his face. "Not good?"

He looked up at her. "The governor's office. They'll be here tomorrow. To offer 'help.'"

"Oh, I bet." She glanced down the corridor to make sure no one was close. "What are you going to do?"

He let out a sigh. "It seems I have about twenty-four hours to figure that out."



## CHAPTER 34

Needing some time to think, and not ready to face the office yet, Martin pulled into his driveway, sitting in the car for a moment, stymied. He'd created a pickle, and no way out was coming clearly to him. The money, his political career, his reputation... Even his father's role in the pickpocket ring, were in question. And in the morning, the governor would be sending her hitman to put the final nail in the coffin.

He'd evaluated while driving that perhaps the offer of help was genuinely that. But it was a pipe dream. What he knew of Devereaux, she hadn't gotten to the top of the state by playing nice in the sandbox. She would crush anyone who was in the way of her aspirations, and suddenly Martin was the ant taking up space on her sidewalk.

He'd called Abigail and let her know that he wouldn't be in until noon, so he had a window of time to try to come up with a strategy. Though, it felt like he was on a sinking ship, and his best option was to find a way to survive. Unfortunately, at this point, he didn't even have access to his closest confidant, Connie. Another situation he couldn't wrap his mind around.

Preferring to wallow in his despondence inside rather than sitting in his car, he got out, making a quick trip to his mailbox first, as he hadn't gathered his mail in a few days. Inside were a handful of envelopes, junk mail, and a book-sized package. He pulled that one free and noticed the address – his sister in Florida. **DO NOT BEND** was written to the left of his address. The gesture gave him a

slight smile, despite his frustration, and he thought back to their conversation about her starting to go through her own photos. She must have found some good ones she wanted him to have. Even just a little something to make him feel better. Which was nice of her.

Not wanting to wait, he poked his finger into the envelope as he took a few steps toward his front door, but was interrupted by a voice to his right.

“Mayor Ebel,” a man’s voice called him.

He turned to see Peter Blythe standing a dozen feet away. “You followed me?” he said, instinctually.

“I did,” he nodded. “I’m sorry. I thought it would be good for us to talk. Do you mind?”

Martin was tense, not having anticipated this visit. Blythe was the last person he wanted to see, but immediately his mind started to try to convince himself that this could be a beneficial thing. He didn’t know how, but unless Blythe wanted to propose something certifiably crazy – which was possible – perhaps the two of them could figure something out that would please Petrelli, and save him from the governor. He abandoned his sister’s envelope and nodded toward Blythe to follow him inside.

Once inside, Blythe took a seat at his dining room table and Martin offered him coffee, which he shook off, so he sat opposite him. “What’s on your mind?”

“It seems that we’ve all been put into a no-win situation.”

He took that in for a moment, quietly, trying to anticipate where Blythe might be going. Finally, he nodded and said, “I agree.”

“Your father had nothing to do with us.”

“I know.”

“Well,” Blythe leaned back in his chair. “Your opponent is going to make the case that he did. In fact, I believe she’s got something going out today. An e-mail. Probably a postcard, too.”

He let out a breath. “Maybe you shouldn’t have given her the photo.”

“I did not.” He was shaking his head.

“But you know who did.”

Now, he nodded. “I do.”

“Are you here to tell me?”

A smile crossed his face. “That depends.”

Martin could feel anger rising in him. “Look, Peter, we’re way past being coy here. In twenty-four hours, we’re both going to lose here. Did you come here to play games with me?”

He shook his head again. “No, I didn’t.”

“So, what do you want?”

“I want you to back off. You’ve done a great job of connecting people with their things. But you’ve exhausted it now. No one else is coming, and the situation is just floundering at this point. If we went in to see the judge tomorrow and told her we’ve worked it out, I think that she’ll respect that.”

“You want the money.”

“No, Martin.” He was indignant. “I don’t care about the money. I was going to give anything I got from it to Randy’s wife all along.”

“You never made it seem that way.”

“I’m not a fan of someone else telling me what I should do with my personal property.”

Martin looked to the side, thinking for a moment. “What about your friends?”

“I don’t care what they do with their share. That’s never what this was about.”

Looking back to him, “Was it about destroying me?”

Blythe leaned forward, putting his hands on the table. “You talked to Scott.”

“You can understand why it’s difficult for me to believe you didn’t give the photo to Miranda.”

He nodded. “I can. But I didn’t.”

“So, who did?”

Blythe was wheeling and dealing in his mind – Martin could see it plainly on his face. At some point, he must have gotten to a place of comfort that the conversation was moving in his direction. “It was Devereaux.”

“The governor?” He didn’t see that coming.

“Well, her office.”

Now, Martin stood and paced, contemplating. Why would the governor be working against him? The mayor’s race in Seaside Heights was of such little significance on the statewide scale, and besides the point Sanderson-Cox

was running as an independent. He was the Democrat. Just by party loyalty, one would think Devereaux would, if not getting involved at all, be pushing for Martin to achieve his comeback victory.

He leaned on his breakfast bar, turning back to Blythe. "That makes no sense."

"Sure it does." He leaned back again, crossing one leg over the other, comfortably. "Separate yourself from the situation, and put on your political hat."

"I'm not getting it."

"It's not about *your* election, Martin. She doesn't care about that. It's about her. She's now created a crisis here, that she needs to come in and solve. Did you read the whole story in the news this morning?"

"I did."

"The governor was quoted. There is no chance that that reporter called the governor's office. Why would she? She's got nothing to do with anything. So, how did she get a quote in?"

He let out a sigh, admitting, "They prompted it."

"Yes, they did. They've been watching everything the whole time, waiting for the right moment to pounce." Now, he stood to face him. "You think I'm the enemy here. I'm not. I'm just trying to do right by my friends. In a way that is perfectly legal, if not in the way everyone would like it to be."

"No, no, no," Martin said, waving his finger at him. "That's bullshit. Belanger told me this was a witch hunt from the start, because of my step-father. He was the jeweler who called you out. Shut down your operation. You wanted to stick it to me, and you waited until I was running for office to strike. The governor had to get that picture from somewhere to give it to her. I'm guessing *that* was you."

He shrugged. "Honestly, I have no idea how she got the photo." He was lying, but Martin wasn't going to push it. "And about your election, yes, perhaps it started out that way, but then the mob showed up on your side. That wasn't a battle I was going to fight."

"Good thing, too. They don't like you very much."

"I'm hoping I dodged a bullet. Literally. Thank you for not just turning me over to them."

"I don't know that what you've done is egregious enough to have you whacked."

"Well, it's very much appreciated."

They'd come to the negotiating point of the conversation. Blythe had already put his cards on the table – he wanted the boro to back off. Which was a reasonable request at this point, once Martin took emotion out of the picture. At his root, he loathed the idea of Blythe coming out of this situation with even one red dime. But he did know that they'd exhausted the outreaches to potential owners. The calls and e-mails had dropped to a trickle, and it had been days since a legitimate claim had come in. His gambit, successful to a point, was over.

"So, you've said what you want to get out of this visit... What's in it for me?"

He was ready with an answer. "I can come out and let people know that your father had nothing to do with us."

"Once she gets that idea in people's mailboxes, you saying that won't make much of a difference, unfortunately. I'll have to tackle that one on my own."

"How?"

"That's not your worry. What else have you got?"

"I can let Petrelli know how the photo got out."

"Without incriminating yourself?"

"I didn't give it to her."

"Yeah, prove it."

They stood for a moment in silence, Martin feeling like Blythe had more to say, but nothing came. The consummate salesman had run out of pitches.

He shook his head. "I'm all ears. We have until tomorrow morning for you to come up with something. You have to understand, I'm trying to save an election, my political career, and my reputation. If you want to understand my motivation to make a fair deal here, start there."

Without a word, Blythe turned and headed to the front door. Martin stood for a moment, then followed, calling after him, "You'd better deal with your friends. Their interests are not aligned with yours."

Blythe turned. “You want some advice, Mayor? If your priorities are your ‘election, your political career and your reputation,’ you’re already done. Make it about the people you represent. None of this has ever been about me, but you want to *make it* between you and me. That’s the wrong approach.”

“Thank you for the insight.”

Blythe laughed, feeling as though he was trying to give advice, that was being unheeded. “Honestly, if I were you, I’d release all your dad’s photos. Just put them out there and overwhelm people with memories.” They stood, ten feet apart, in silence, for a tense moment, then Blythe turned. “I’ll see you tomorrow morning.”

Not watching him walk away, Martin let the door close behind him and retreated inside, aggravated. He didn’t know why he’d even had a glimmer of belief that the conversation could have been productive – and while he may have gotten a tidbit about the governor leaking the photo, he didn’t necessarily believe it. In fact, he was quite certain Blythe was responsible, as he had the most to gain from it.

Leaning on his breakfast bar again, he cursed the wasted conversation – the judge’s morning deadline was hovering over him, and he’d just lost fifteen minutes of strategy time. Then, he stewed for several minutes on top of it, completely distracted, until he finally calmed down. Checking the clock, he had about ninety minutes until he said he’d be at the office, though that was an arbitrary number. But, there *was* plenty of real work sitting on his new desk.

For a breather, he decided to indulge in the package from his sister, hoping her thoughtfulness might put a smile on his face. He grabbed the envelope and sat at the table again, ripping into it and pulling out a piece of worn, light blue paper wrapped around a pile that he could tell from touch was a small stack of photos. The paper was faded at the edges, and had been wrinkled, as if crumpled up at some point. Facing him was scrawled a note in handwriting he found familiar, but couldn’t place: “Keep an eye out. – R”

He opened it to find a yellow Post-It with his sister's cursive on it: "I thought this might be of interest to you, given what you're working on. – Carrie."

Confused, he pulled off the Post-It to unveil a handwritten flyer, talking about the Seaside Heights pickpocket ring, and urging whoever had received it to watch for four young men, with descriptions, who have been stealing from people on the Boardwalk. There was no contact information, making it clear this wasn't a formal notice from the police, which confused him.

Without pulling his eyes from the paper, he reached over with his free hand and picked up the stack of photos, moving them into his line of sight. Immediately, he realized they were his father's. As he flipped through them, his mood quickly brightened

In his hand were photo after photo of Blythe and his crew, captured in the act. Richard had followed them for a summer, and exercised his photographic muscle by taking action shots of the criminals through what he had to assume was his telephoto lens. On the Boardwalk. On the beach. In the arcade. Incredible photos that gave Martin a sense of pride in his father that he hadn't felt in a long time, if ever. To the point where it was lost on him that the photos, themselves, would undo anything Sanderson-Cox wanted to say about Richard's involvement. These were actual history being recorded.

After making his way through the entire pile – about forty photos - he wondered why Carrie had them. She would have had no reason to have any of his father's stuff, as they had nothing to do with each other.

He fished in his pocket to get his phone and dialed her. After a few tones, her voice came on the other end.

"You finally got it? I was waiting."

"When did you send it?"

"Last week."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I've been swamped and didn't check the mailbox. It was probably sitting there. Where did you get these?"

"I told you... You inspired me to start going through stuff. I found it in one of my dad's boxes. Bunch of jewelry stuff. It's been in the basement for years. Actually found a

tray of loose stones in there. Emeralds, sapphires. Don't know if they're worth anything."

He was still confused, even with the explanation. "I don't understand why you would have these pictures, though. Our fathers really didn't have anything to—"

"I think that was the flyer. Look at the back. I'm assuming that's your dad's writing, right? It's signed with an 'R.'"

He flipped it over and realized why the writing was familiar. It was, indeed, his father's. Understanding hit him. "So, he sent this note over to David, to warn him about Blythe and his friends trying to sell the jewelry they stole?"

"It seems that way."

"Wow." He needed a moment to gather it in. Among all of the photos his father had taken in the seventies, he'd chosen to send a handful to the man who'd married his ex-wife. His mind put it together. His father would figure that the thieves were trying to sell the gold, or, they told him straight out while he was photographing them, and somehow he'd connected it to Martin's step-father's jewelry shop. This flyer was handwritten and not copied, so it was personally created for David, and included the incriminating photos, which is why they'd never made it into his dad's collection. "This is incredible."

"Does it help?"

"I believe it does. Thank you so much."

"How are things going?" she asked.

His mind was far from the conversation, and he stumbled over the answer before collecting himself. "I actually don't know now. This kind of changes things."

She caught that he was distant. "Okay. Glad I could help. Let me know if there's anything else I can do."

"Yes. Thank you."

They hung up, and Martin remained sitting in awe at what had just happened. He regretted not opening the envelope prior to inviting Blythe in, as it would have dramatically changed that conversation. Now, he felt like he had a grenade in his hand that could take out multiple enemies at the same time.



The question was when to pull the pin and where to throw it.

## CHAPTER 35

Peter unfolded the stool and set it on the grass. It was hot out in the sun, but he wouldn't be there for long. The ground was dry, as it hadn't rained in days, so he pushed down on the seat to make sure he wouldn't topple over, then sat.

In front of him was a grave marker – the final resting place of one of the few people in his entire life he'd been close with.

He sat for a moment in the serene silence of the massive cemetery, hearing only a slight breeze rustling the leaves in the plentiful trees around him. As a person who'd spent his entire life chasing activity and action, the idea of ending up in a peaceful suburban graveyard mortified him, and whether Randy the tenured high school teacher felt the same way or not, Peter felt sorry for him. They'd been off to such a great start.

Peter knew he wouldn't be back, and had made it a point to get one last time, a few moments of alone time, with his friend. What he had to say to him – what he hadn't gotten to say – was too important.

After another moment of contemplation, he'd waited long enough. "Let me tell you why I'm angry at you," he said, his voice cutting into the silence. "Six more weeks. That's all I needed you to hang on for, was six more weeks. We had a deal."

He let that hang in the air for a moment so Randy could absorb it. Peter could picture him getting defensive, as if suggesting that something as life-changing as dying

from cancer was out of his control. “This would have worked if we’d just had six more weeks.”

Now, he leaned forward on the stool and put his head in his hands. This was harder than he thought. How do you put the blame for all of this on your friend who wasn’t there to defend himself?

“Ah, I should’ve clued you in on what was going on,” he said, sitting back up with a wave of his hand, mostly directly at himself. “I wonder if that would have made a difference. If you knew this was happening, would you have held on?” As though Peter’s quest was inspiration enough.

He’d given a lot of thought to what he’d wanted to say, but most of it had been incoherent babbling and making excuses. Yes, he’d been outplayed by the conglomeration of people who had come up against him. Perhaps outnumbered was a better description of what had happened. And while that stung, he couldn’t help but believe that had he been able to implement his plans as he’d intended, the outcome would have been different.

“See, here’s what I didn’t tell you and should have,” he sat forward again, moving into explanation mode, talking to the headstone. “I’m surprised nobody’s asked, but they’re probably afraid to. Everything that’s transpired over the last few weeks? That was all set to happen. But not yet. I wanted it closer to the election, so Ebel couldn’t focus. I made a judgment call, though, that moving quickly after you died would make more sense. I was wrong.” He sat back, again, looking past Randy’s grave marker off into the landscape. “I was wrong.”

It was true that no one had said a word to him about his timing, which was strange, particularly as the details of his forty-year plan became known to people. Even with all of the planning, his meticulous scheme, moving all of his chess pieces into place, there was no way that he could have possibly known that Randy would be leaving them, and use it as a catalyst to kick everything off... His story about a friend who recently passed away who knew about the gold that got Ebel going in the first place. It was improvised.

“Why?” he asked, as if his friend was conversing with him. “Because if I drop this on Ebel a week before his

election, he's got no time to react to it. Look at how he responded... He did exactly what I wanted him to, right away. But then he had the luxury of time, and was able to do... Well, I don't need to rehash it for you. Rest assured, though, if Ebel's only got a week or so to deal with it, there's no nationwide campaign to track people down. Once he loses that election, he'd have been finished with it."

He paused, letting silence fill the air again, until he remembered: "Plus, Scazzafava would've already been dead." He let out a sigh. "That certainly would've changed things."

Randy continued his imaginary conversation with him, so Peter answered, "No, you're right. I couldn't have seen that coming, either. Thank you."

Now, Peter sat back and laughed at himself for his back-and-forth with his deceased friend. He was satisfied that they had an understanding, and could leave town knowing they were square. As such, he stood and folded up his stool.

"Alright, buddy," he said, reaching out and touching the top of Randy's headstone. "Good visit. I'm still not happy with you, but I'll get over it." He paused, his hand still on the smooth stone. "Sorry I let you down."

Peter turned and headed for his car.

## CHAPTER 36

Leaving his house and opting to walk, Martin itemized what he needed to accomplish in the next, now, twenty-two hours. Turns out, it was much more complicated than when the deadline had first hit been imposed.

He'd talked himself into believing that the governor's chief-of-staff's arrival the next morning presented a significant opportunity to turn the entire scenario in his favor, but an awful lot had to get done before then. He had to organize multiple players – including some that quite possibly were actively working against him. Without taking time to write everything down, he'd tried to organize his thoughts.

Fortunately, he'd been able to identify clear motivations for everyone involved – with the exception, of course, of Connie, who he was hoping he'd be able to bring along for the ride by, ironically, accepting the advice of Peter Blythe. Where was the real opportunity here? Was it for him and his political career, or was it for the people he was supposed to be representing? That little bit of wisdom had set him on his course, and it was on that path that he steered away from Boro Hall and up Ocean Terrace to the expansive mini-golf course that could be seen from blocks away.

Pirates Cove Mini-Golf was one of the focal points of Seaside Heights' offerings off of the Boardwalk proper and a popular family destination. It was ordained with all kinds of pirate swag, shipwreck remains and other seafaring paraphernalia – thirty-six holes of putting challenges. Martin didn't brag about it (much), but on

Course #1, the easier or the two courses, when he was in his twenties, on a date, he missed the course record that hung on the wall behind the counter by one stroke, with a nifty 27 over 18 holes (never came close to that score again – he must’ve really liked, or disliked, his date, who to this day he couldn’t remember her name).

He walked into the small clubhouse to where a young man he knew from just being around, Matt, was working. “Matt, good morning,” he said, having gotten going faster than expected. “Is Kelly here?”

“Sure, I’ll get her,” Matt thumbed to the door behind him.

Kelly Hanover’s office, Martin knew, was through the non-descript door behind the counter, and was cleverly hidden in what would be the captain’s cabin of the replica pirate ship that served as the epicenter of all thirty-six holes. Before Vinny Jr. had arrived with his new furniture, Martin had thought her office was just about the coolest office a boss could have. Probably still was – no offense to the Scazzafava family.

Matt disappeared to get her, and then returned. “She said you can just go back,” he said.

Martin swung behind the counter and made his way through the door into Kelly’s office. Inside, the office looked like... an office, only there were hidden windows to the outside, where Kelly could see the golfers in action, and which let in a fair amount of sunlight. She was typing something on her computer, so Martin sat, letting her finish.

After a moment, she turned to him, busy but pleasant. “What brings you, Mister Mayor?”

“I need something,” he said, no time for small talk. “I need something you have, and I’m hoping you’ll be willing to help me. But, I – and I apologize, but I’m under a time crunch so this is going to come across as extremely forward – I need to know if you’re working with Miranda.”

Caught off-guard, she laughed out loud, and leaned back in her chair, almost all the way back to a credenza holding piles of paperwork behind her. She took a minute to collect herself after the question while Martin waited. “With Miranda?” Shaking her head slowly, she

enlightened him. “No. I have absolutely no desire to get involved in this scuffle that the two of you have going on. Or, any of this stuff with the buried treasure. Nothing good can come out of it.”

“Well, maybe something can.”

“How’s that?”

He took a deep breath. “I’m sorry about the way I asked that. After that meeting, where you made that comment about the new furniture – I wasn’t sure.”

She sat forward. “Martin, come on. Even you have to admit that looks weird.”

“I get it,” he said, nodding helplessly. “I had no idea how to handle that situation. I don’t see how you say no. What would you have done?”

Kelly thought for a moment, then a grin crossed her face. “I don’t know. I’m just glad it wasn’t me.” That made him laugh. “So, what do you need?”

“Connie told me at one point that you’d connected with one of the brothers who owned Moroni’s.”

She nodded. “I did. Haven’t gotten far with him, but I at least tracked him down.” She laughed. “They’re in St. Maarten. They left, and they left for good. That whole situation is very frustrating. And weird.”

“Have you heard any interest on the building?”

“Some,” she shrugged. “Nobody’s really going to get excited about the parcel until there’s a solution here. I think we have a few more months to wait before we can just take it.”

“And they’re non-committal?”

“No, they don’t care. I don’t know if it’s a tax shelter or something, but we haven’t even gotten to a dollar figure yet. You know the boro can only afford so much.”

“Right,” he said, nodding. “Would you mind if I reached out?”

“Not at all.” She went back to her computer and started searching. “You have something in mind?”

“Well, you’re right. The boro can only afford so much. Maybe we can leverage our new relationships to get a financial backer.”

She turned from the screen. “Who?”

He smiled. “Someone with money. If you’ll let me get away with just that answer, I will make you not only the first

one to know what I'm trying to do, but you can hold the scissors at the ribbon cutting."

She hit print and a page emerged from her printer, which she grabbed and handed to him. "The brother I talked to is Danny Petrick. I don't think he's the brains of the operation, which is why I think that's who they've let talk to me. He can't make a decision himself, so there's no harm for them in having a conversation. The older brother is Donny."

"Danny and Donny?"

"I know." She held her hand out. "Have at it. But, yes, this is my baby. That place is an eyesore, and we need to get it taken care of. I'd like to be involved."

He nodded. "You are. I appreciate this very much."

"Good luck to you. Let me know what else you need."

Martin thanked her again and left the office, saying goodbye to Matt on his way out and emerging onto the sidewalk in the sunshine.

Once outside, he pulled out his mobile phone and dialed, putting the phone to his ear.

Naomi Grey answered. "Hello?"

"I have a plan, and I need your help," he told her.



## CHAPTER 37

Peter stepped out of the parking ramp and turned southward on Hudson Street, less than a block from the tall, blue and grey building that was his destination. The area never ceased to amaze him, as he remembered back when Jersey City was a run-down place where you didn't want to mistakenly find yourself. Now, skyscrapers filled the airspace with demand and property values approaching those of the ones across the river in Manhattan.

It struck him how much had changed in his home state since he'd left as a teenager, but he was ambivalent about it. He was the type to get excited about new development, because it meant action and excitement, but now he couldn't get enthused. In fact, he found he couldn't get enthused about anything right now – something he hoped he could overcome. He felt old, but not old enough to lose all ambition. He had another run at something in him. Despite the loss he was headed toward. He just wasn't feeling it right now.

It was actually his first visit to Starr's office – they'd previously only connected in South Jersey, with the attorney making the journey to meet his client on his home turf. Starr had been highly recommended, and his high-rise office offering a view of Lower Manhattan boosted Peter's confidence in his decision. He'd been an expensive option, yes, but he also knew that Starr had given him somewhat of a break because of the possibility of national exposure (Peter, the consummate salesperson, may have had something to do with him forming that

opinion). Walking through the front doors of his building, he wondered if his attorney now had regrets, given the outcome.

He signed in at the main desk, where a gruff security guard directed him to the fourteenth floor, and the elevators behind him. He made the rise up, and emerged into a sharp, well-appointed law office. A pretty brunette with long hair down her back sat at the main desk, with a glassed conference room to Peter's left, currently empty. Beyond the large wooden table which sat maybe a dozen, he could see the lower Manhattan skyline through floor-to-ceiling picture windows.

"Peter Blythe to see Mister Starr," he said, approaching the desk. "He's expecting me."

He hadn't been expecting him, as of a half hour ago. Peter had called from the New Jersey Turnpike letting Starr know he'd be stopping by, Starr having told him after court that morning that he was heading back to his office. He hadn't needed his attorney to necessarily be there in person, but was glad he was.

The receptionist disappeared for a moment down the hallway beyond the conference room and emerged a moment later with Starr in tow. "Peter," he greeted, extending his hand. "I'm glad you're here. I have some—"

Peter shook his hand and motioned with his head toward the conference room. "Can we talk in there?"

Starr obliged and led him into the conference room, offering Peter water or coffee as he found a seat, his back to the windows. Peter shook him off.

"So, what's the rush? I was going to see you in about eighteen hours."

Peter shook his head. "I'm heading out. Leaving town."

Starr sat forward in his own seat. "You can't do that. Petrelli ordered you to be there."

He waved his hand. "Yeah, that's if we were going to keep this going. You'll be there to represent me."

"You're throwing in the towel?"

"What else is there to do? We've played all of our cards."

“Well, no... I think the judge is teetering back in our direction-”

“She’s not,” Peter said. “She’s not. We committed crimes, and while we may have pulled a fast one using idiosyncrasies in the law, she’s not going for it. Ebel’s move to open the vault to the victims was a strong play. If Scazzafava had never shown up... If Timmy had just followed the rules... If Randy hadn’t died... We’d be in a stronger position. It is what it is at this point.”

He could see on Starr’s face that he was about to get defensive, so he put his hands up. “This isn’t an attack on you or your work. This was my gambit. I talked you into taking it on. I got outplayed. You didn’t.”

Starr let out a breath. Peter immediately didn’t like that his attorney seemed to be alright if he didn’t have to wear the defeat, but he’d dwell on that later. “Now you’re leaving?” Starr asked.

He nodded. “I am.”

“Where to?”

“Not sure yet.”

“What do you want me to tell the judge?”

“Tell them that I’m in with whatever Scott and Tim want to do. Whatever they decide is good with me.” He paused, looking down at the table, then smiled. “I guess if my goal was to do right by them, then that’s a victory, in itself.”

“Probably a hollow one.”

He looked up at him. “Yes.” After another moment of contemplation, he opened the portfolio he’d been carrying. “Which brings us to your billing, which I want to take care of before I hit the road. Not fair to you to have to try to chase me down.” He pulled out small stack of pages with a paper check clipped to it, and slid it across the table to Starr.

“We don’t have to deal with this right now, Peter.”

“Well, there are a few things I wanted to discuss with you.”

Starr picked up the packet and flipped quickly through, then looked up at him. “I’m assuming you want to discuss why you’ve crossed off some of these items.”

“Yes, thank you,” he said, all business. “As best as I can determine, those are the billable hours spent surrounding

you going to visit Randy's wife." He paused, maintaining eye contact. "Which I never asked you to do."

"You asked me to win this case for you, Peter. I saw that as—"

"Some things were off limits. And while I may not have said that directly to you, certainly my demeanor in front of the judge and with Scott and Tim should have been enough. So, I'm not paying for that time."

He started to retort, but held up his hands instead. "That's fine, Peter. What else?"

He pointed to the packet. "Flip a few more pages." Starr did, until he came to the next highlighted section, and looked up at him. "Where," he emphasized, "did you get the idea to send the photo to the governor's office?"

"Like everything else we've done, it was a gambit."

"A gambit?" He shook his head. "Those are my friends in that photo. We planned this whole thing out so we could use the photo as evidence, but never have it made public."

"No one can tell who they are, forty years later," Starr dismissed him. "Everyone's fine. I thought injecting some chaos would strengthen our case, and given Ebel's wanting to expose everything, it would look like he was responsible. I actually don't think it could have turned out better."

"You think it turned out well?"

"Peter," he said, incredulous. "This morning the judge was so incensed about the photo leak that she completely shut down Ebel's circus act. Over. Done. He keeps that going for another fifteen days, maybe there's nothing left in the vault by the time he's finished. Notwithstanding, the fact that the governor slipped it to Ebel's opponent hits on one of your primary goals here – to see him defeated in his election. Plus, to quell your concerns, no one knows who's in that photo."

"Someone knows. Someone can figure it out."

"But they haven't, and they won't. It could be any four teenage punks from the seventies standing there."

Peter nodded. "You still shouldn't have done it. Not without telling me. That could've put us all in danger."

Starr shook his head. "It didn't. It won't."

They sat in silence for a moment, before Starr picked up the packet again, flipping through the last few pages.

“No, that’s everything,” Peter said. “I’m just not paying for those things.”

He set the papers down, and separated Peter’s check, holding it up to read. “Okay. We’re square.”

“Except for whatever fees you incur tomorrow morning,” he said. “But keep it short. You shouldn’t need to be there long, with what we discussed.”

Starr set the check on the packet and slid it to the side. “Don’t know where you’re going?”

“Does it matter?”

“Well, I hope you stay safe. For what it’s worth, I think you’re making a good decision here. It’ll go a long way with the judge and, more importantly, your friends.”

“It’s Ebel’s friends I’m worried about.”

“Maybe it’ll go a long way with them, too.”

“Let’s hope.”

## CHAPTER 38

Had it lingered, the first rain they'd seen in more than two weeks would've dampened everything Martin was trying to accomplish – in more ways than one. His stomach had been tight all morning because of it. Or, at least, that's what he told himself. Easier to blame the rain than the knowledge that he'd pinned his entire election and political future on a wild gambit that had more moving pieces than he could count.

It was still gray at 8:30 a.m., though the clouds were starting to break up offering the promise of another chamber of commerce Jersey Shore beach day. Kenneth Uhle, from the governor's office, who he'd never met in-person, had texted, saying he was ten minutes away. That was twelve minutes before, but Martin believed in his intent.

While he waited, he recollected all of the steps he'd taken to getting here – standing on the wet sidewalk in front of the shut-down Moroni's restaurant, waiting for the governor's representative to arrive, so he could pitch him his grand idea. It had been a busy night, and he'd been on phone calls and in e-mail chains until nearly midnight, picking up again early that morning, bringing all of the pieces of this incredibly complicated puzzle together. At 8 p.m. the night before, he'd felt comfortable with his progress, and messaged his contact in the governor's office, Brenda, to see if, instead of meeting at Boro Hall, Kenneth could meet him here.

That was only after successfully connecting with Danny Petrick (and even getting a few minutes on the phone with Donny), speaking with several of the boro councilmembers, finally following up with the Seaside Heights Historical Society, talking with Scott Belanger and Tim Turner, coordinating with Naomi Grey, and even exchanging e-mails with Vinny Scazzafava, Jr. He hoped that he'd covered all his bases.

Of course, the glaring omission was Connie. Could she possibly have been on the list? Yes, as a member of the Citizens Advisory Committee, but they both would've known the truth – that he would only have been reaching out to her for personal reasons. He'd rung her up in his phone contacts a few times over the course of the evening, and then once again that morning, but had never hit send. He had to take care of all of this, first.

Feeling confident with the collection of input he'd received, he checked his watch again, only to catch a silver SUV approaching slowly out of the corner of his eye. It pulled to a stop, technically illegally, next to him along the curb, and a tall, African-American man, clean cut and dressed in a charcoal suit, his coat still draped over the back seat, got out and approached him.

“Kenneth?” Martin asked, walking toward him.

“Yes,” he answered, extending his hand, which Martin took, “Kenneth Uhle.”

“Martin Ebel,” he finished the intros. “Thanks so much for meeting me here.”

“I'm curious to know why.”

Martin held his hand out and welcomed Kenneth onto the sidewalk and toward the dilapidated building. “We appreciate the governor's interest in everything we have going on here,” he began. “Short of an occasional hurricane, we don't always get Trenton's attention. This is an important time for us, so we're happy to have you here.”

They stepped around into the small parking lot on the north side of the building, the steps up to the Boardwalk at this particular entry in view. The restaurant's parking lot, for the months the establishment had been closed, represented another waste of precious space along the highly-developed corridor.

“I’m going to talk quickly,” he said, “because at ten o’clock, I have to be at the Ocean County Courthouse, as Judge Petrelli is going to be putting this whole situation with the gold buried under the Boardwalk to bed. We have a real opportunity here, and I’ve aligned all of the pieces together but one.”

“What are you looking to accomplish?”

He took a deep breath. “For more than a decade, my father walked up and down the beach and Boardwalk here in Seaside, taking photos of everything and anything that interested him. Obviously, you’ve seen some of this come out in the news. What hasn’t been made public is that there are volumes of photos. Volumes. Maybe thousands of pictures, telling the story of that chapter of Seaside’s history. These photos – including the ones that are currently being held by the court as evidence in this ongoing situation – all belong to me. I’d like to donate them, the entire collection, to Seaside.”

“What’s stopping you?”

“Where to put them.” He let that hang in the air for a moment, but Uhle said nothing. Just looked at the building. “I have commitments for enough capital to fund the creation of a new tourist attraction here in Seaside: a state-of-the-art photographic history museum. We can start with my father’s photos as the center point, and then expand to make it an open-source collection of Jersey Shore history.”

“Open source, meaning anyone can contribute?”

He nodded. “That’s the idea.”

In truth, that wasn’t his idea when he’d first gone to see Hanover the morning before. Everything he was looking to do surrounded Richard’s photo collection, and perhaps adding to it through the work of other professional photographers over the years. It was actually Wendy Price from the Seaside Heights Historical Society who suggested going bigger with the idea. Martin had reticently involved her, knowing that she could easily have seen what he was trying to accomplish as competition for the current Seaside Heights Historical Museum, which was located in the original carousel building up on the Boardwalk, a little ways down from where they were



standing. But, the reality was that given the space they would need, there wasn't capacity there. Price had jumped on the idea, and offered the bigger concept as a bookend destination to the Museum – while subtly suggesting that management of the new facility also fall under the Society's purview.

Uhle knew it, too. "Didn't we just give the boro some money for a new museum a couple years ago?"

"You did, yes. This project would complement the current museum, which really has no space because the carousel takes up most of it. I have the support of the Historical Society, who would run both facilities."

Uhle turned to Martin and put up his hands. "Let's step back a bit here," he said, his voice becoming forceful. "What's going on with the gold? The governor feels like she's not in the loop."

Martin had anticipated the interrogation, which is why he'd tried to jump ahead of it. "And I apologize for that," he answered, just as the first sun ray broke through the grey above. "Unfortunately, everything is being steered by the court, and a few of us have already been slapped by the judge for talking outside of school. Where it stands now is that about fifty percent of the items have been verified and claimed through the process Judge Petrelli set up. This morning, however, she's said that she's bringing the whole situation to a close. Some photos were leaked, and she wasn't happy with games that were being played."

"Who leaked the photos?"

Martin let out an involuntary snicker, because he was likely standing in front of the person responsible, but covered it up, shaking his head. "We don't know. But I don't know that it matters. She wasn't happy."

"What does all this mean?"

"Well, if she sticks to her original interpretation, the rest goes to Peter Blythe and his team – the ones who stole the jewelry in the first place – to do with as they will."

"That hardly seems right."

"I think everyone agrees. Including all three of Blythe's partners – well, the two that can speak for themselves and the estate of the third. They have all agreed to donate whatever their share is to the boro to support this project. Our intent is, within this

photographic museum, to dedicate a display to the infamous Seaside Heights pickpocket ring of nineteen seventy-nine.”

Uhle was shaking his head, with a wry smile on his face. “Wow. This is *not* what the governor thinks is happening.”

“But it’s something that can happen. With her help.”

“So, you’re saying the remaining items in the vault will go to, what, build this museum?” he asked, turning his attention back to the building. “Even estimating high, let’s say there’s fifty thousand left in there. That’s not going to even make a dent, much less create a tourist attraction inside.”

“Well, I have an additional commitment from the North Jersey labor unions to support the creation of a state-of-the-art museum experience.”

Uhle scoffed, then smirked. “The North Jersey labor unions,” he repeated. “How much?”

“Whatever we need, once we are able to get control of the building.”

Martin had played his ace. He, and anyone who knew anything about New Jersey politics, knew that Governor Devereaux had not had a good relationship with Vincent Scazzafava, and they had not supported her in the way that unions had traditionally supported Democrat candidates. In her last election, her victory was never in doubt, which left the unions flexibility to hold out, over a squabble over benefits – Devereaux going after the state workers’ generous benefit programs as an election issue to bring herself a little more towards some fiscal conservatism after tax increases she’d been forced to implement in her first term. Both she and the unions had chosen each other as extraneous allies that they could afford to temporarily put out, but Martin knew that the governor desperately wanted to reel them back in before her next election. Vinny Jr.’s ascendancy definitely offered an opportunity to mend relations.

“And that’s where you need the governor.”

Martin nodded.

“How much?” Then, he remembered something. “Wait, is this the building where the two brothers skipped town and you couldn’t find them?”

He laughed. “We did find them. Finally. They’re in the Caribbean. I talked to them yesterday. The court says we can eminent domain in about six months. I told them that, and that we’d prefer not to wait.”

“And?”

“They’re literally sitting on a beach negotiating with me. They don’t care. Like, your stereotypical surfer dudes. Apparently, the reason the left is because they inherited a whole bunch of money and decided that life would be easier without the restaurant to deal with. They agreed to an amount fifty thousand more than we would’ve given them to just take it from them. Something about their mother’s lucky number, or the address of the home they grew up in. I don’t know. But I think we do it.”

Uhle sighed. “This is the story you’d like to give to the judge this morning?”

“It is.”

Now, he looked toward the Boardwalk, thinking.

“Scazzafava?”

Martin smiled, even though he was trying desperately not to, and Uhle wasn’t looking at him, anyway. “He said he’d be happy to meet with the governor while they’re both in town for the grand opening of this facility.”

Uhle continued pondering for a moment as the sunshine spread around them. Even at the early hour, Martin could feel the heat rise with the clouds parting.

After a moment, the governor’s chief-of-staff turned and held out his hand for Martin to shake. “What time’s your meeting with the judge?”

“Ten o’clock.”

“I believe I have your cell?”

Martin gave it to him, just in case.

## CHAPTER 39

In a way, Scott was relieved that Peter had chosen not to attend Petrelli's confab, because the rest of them had coalesced against him. While what they were doing was most certainly the right thing to do, Peter was his friend, and he had no desire to watch him, in-person, go down in flames.

He also felt bad for Tim, having made the drive down for literally nothing. The outcome was well-scripted, and it was just a matter of seeing it all play out. Ebel had done a fantastic job of positioning his chess pieces, and the conversation was largely focused on just a few of them, meaning he and Tim were simply onlookers at this point.

Watching Peter's dirtbag lawyer, Starr, go down in flames? Well, that was a different story. They were just finishing the part of the discussion where Petrelli dressed him up-and-down for Peter not being in attendance in the judge's chambers, as ordered. She threatened to hold him in contempt-of-court, but stopped just short, since Peter had authorized his attorney to go along with whatever solution the rest of them wanted to put forward.

She did, however, hold someone in contempt-of-court, and that was Ebel's opponent in the upcoming election, Miranda Sanderson-Cox, who was a late addition to the roster for the morning's meeting. Sanderson-Cox, in her enthusiasm at putting the final nail in Ebel's coffin, had kicked off a social media campaign and, as they learned there, dropped a mail piece that was to hit that same day – that included the photo of the four of them,

and implicated Ebel's father as a co-conspirator with the boys back in 1979.

Everyone on-hand was getting a law school-level course in the sanctity of evidence.

"I don't care about Brianna McDaniel and the *Asbury Park Press*," Petrelli said. "She had the sense to call me and ask about the photo. She can write all she wants about its existence. The paper did not print the photo, as per my order. You did."

"I wasn't aware of the order," Sanderson-Cox pleaded. "As such, I'm not responsible for it."

Petrelli nodded. "Well, there's an easy solution. You tell me who gave you the photo, and I'll take it up with them instead."

Ebel had shared with Scott how the incriminating photo had made its way into the candidate's hands, and he knew that there was zero chance she would divulge who it was. From his understanding, at this point, Sanderson-Cox wasn't on trial in front of the judge, and not under oath, so she wasn't forced to say anything. Given her source, it was probably best if she just clammed up.

Also, while they were sure it was Starr who'd given the photo to the governor – it had to be someone out of the half-dozen or so of them in-the-know – nobody was going to admit it, so she was stuck. Either Sanderson-Cox rolled over on the governor, or she wore it, herself.

Now, she was silent. "No, Your Honor," she muttered. "I shouldn't have released the photo."

"What's the damage?"

Naomi Grey, Ebel's attorney – or, the boro's attorney – spoke up. "Our understanding is that Missus Cox ran a social media campaign, and sent a mail piece to the entire Seaside Heights voter database. The manager at Peters Printing in Howell confirmed the breadth of the mail list." Martin had given Scott a little inside baseball that Grey had threatened the printer that they, too, could be held in contempt for doing the actual printing – something they didn't want any part of. Scott hadn't asked, but he wondered if it was true.

Petrelli nodded. "Then here's my solution. Missus Cox, you are found to be in contempt-of-court. At your own expense you are to run a retraction of your statement

concerning Mayor Ebel's father, at the same investment that you created the first campaign. Meaning, if you spent one hundred dollars on social media, you run a campaign of equal value. Same with the mailing. You will put a new piece in every mailbox that received the first one. Is that understood?"

"Your Honor, that will destroy my campaign."

The judge wasn't having any of it. "A name will suffice."

Sanderson-Cox paused for a moment, then nodded. "Thank you, Your Honor."

She was conceding her race to save her career. Scott subtly nudged, Tim, beside him, with his elbow, as if saying, "Are you watching this?" They knew better than to glance at each other.

"Missus Sanderson-Cox, you're free to go," Petrelli said, moving on, and handing a small stack of photos wrapped in a folded blue piece of paper across the bench to Grey. Sanderson-Cox disappeared through a side door. "Let's get back to Mayor Ebel's proposal. I like everything I've heard so far. Mister Belanger, Mister Turner, I appreciate your generosity and sense of fair play, as well as your friend's family. The governor's support is certainly welcome. That leaves you, Mister Starr. Where's Mister Blythe fit into all of this?"

Starr nodded. "Peter says... Let the group decide. If they'd like to contribute to Mayor Ebel's museum, then he's all for it."

"Mayor Ebel?"

"We appreciate that. We're happy to recognize--"

"That's not necessary," Starr said, cutting him off. "Peter's comfortable with the solution, as is."

"Then, we will consider this matter closed," Petrelli said with authority. "I hereby turn over what's left of the cache of items to the Boro of Seaside Heights, and would like to extend my appreciation to Mayor Ebel for proposing a solution that benefitted everyone. Thank you all."

With their cue to leave, everyone stood and made their way out into the hallway of the courthouse, the sun pouring through the expansive windows, forcing them to

adjust their eyes from the muted light of Petrelli's chambers.

Scott and Tim pulled to the side while Ebel and Grey talked several feet away.

"That was very interesting," Scott said. "I feel bad you drove all the way down..."

Tim was shaking his head. "Not at all. There's no guarantee it was going to go the way it went. I'm glad it did."

"I'm glad no one can tell who's in that photo."

"You're telling me."

"Headed right back?"

"Yes, I'd like to move quickly to put this whole thing behind me."

"I get it," Scott nodded.

"Where do you think Peter went?"

He sighed. "Probably not far enough."

Tim nodded and clapped him on the shoulder. "Don't be a stranger."

"You first."

His friend disappeared down the hallway, with no indication of when they'd see each other again. For Scott, there was an immediate sadness, but as Tim had just said, all of them were putting the story of the infamous Seaside Heights pickpockets behind them.

Ebel had finished his conversation and turned to Scott, shaking hands. "You know, it's funny," he said. "It was actually your friend Peter's advice that brought this all together."

"How so?"

"He told me I was focused on the wrong thing. I was looking at my election, and my future, and lost sight of the fact that the people of Seaside hired me to represent *them*. Once I got past myself and took that point-of-view, everything became clear."

"I guess not all politicians are built the same, are they?"

Ebel scoffed. "An important lesson to learn, I'm seeing. Thank you for all of your help."

Scott laughed. "I don't know if covering my own skin was actually help, but I'm glad that you got where you needed to be."

“I’ll keep you posted on progress with the museum.”

“Please do. As the only living local representative of the Fab Four, I’m sure I’ll stay in touch.”

They nodded to each other and shook hands again, then dispersed. Scott walked to the parking lot and got in his car, sitting for a moment behind the steering wheel. Suddenly, he was overcome with Peter’s lifelong question, and how his friend would take it not having succeeded. A part of him considered that he’d be okay – that his salesmanship knew no bounds and somehow he’d be able to convince himself that he’d actually won. The more realistic part of his thinking felt the crushing blow of defeat, and he hoped that, despite everything, he’d have the chance to talk to him again someday.

He looked over to his passenger seat where a stack of folders sat with his logo and headshot emblazoned on them. His own legacy. He’d been dragged into an alternative, but it was never anything he wanted. Even from the day they left Alden Jewelers’ parking lot and went to grab a burger. The pickpocket ring was never going to be what defined him.

Putting his car into gear, he put himself back on track.

“Seven more houses,” he muttered, pulling onto the street.



## CHAPTER 40

“Is this?”

Martin nodded, nervously smiling. “That’s the actual flyer.”

“Wow.” Connie’s eyes were wide, taking in Richard’s handwriting on the blue paper. “So, this didn’t come from the police.”

“Apparently not.”

Martin knew it wasn’t a guarantee that Connie would have any interest in seeing him, but on the list of items he needed to address after court that morning, what had happened between the two of them had risen to the top. Which he would admit surprised even him: here in the midst of a fight for his political life, deception, lies and revenge, and the mob’s (alleged) infiltration into their small community, the thing that was most important to him was righting his wrongs with the woman he knew he’d fallen in love with.

It was an odd feeling for someone who had never allowed that part of himself to be at the forefront. His career, then politics, had been his motivating factors guiding him through life. Standing outside Connie’s candy shoppe, just paces from where she was inside likely covered in chocolate, he realized that had changed. What had driven him to do what he’d done, what he’d been able to orchestrate, was not a chance at electoral victory, or even saving his own hide. It was doing what was right. For his community. For Scott and Tim and Randy’s wife. But mostly for Connie.

That being said, he had no idea how he was going to be received walking in, and had made the decision to start with the piece of paper that had gone from his father to his step-father, and which had set the entire situation in motion.

Connie's reaction, when Laura retrieved her from the kitchen, as usual covered in milk chocolate drippings, was cold, at first – as if “not now,” but Martin read something in her eyes. Something telling him that while they weren't aligned, she would prefer they were. That was enough for him to work with.

She inspected the photos, one-by-one. Then the writing on the flyer again. After a moment, she looked up at him. “Where did you get this?”

He pointed. “That piece of paper right there, and those photos, were given to my step-father by my father, back in nineteen seventy-nine. He took those pictures of Blythe and his friends, but apparently didn't want to do anything with them, himself, so he simply turned them over to David, and let him deal with them.”

She shook her head, confused, going through them again. “Why would he do that? I mean, why would he think to do that?”

“I don't know. But he did. I'm assuming the conversation came up at some point, and they made the connection. Maybe he just figured David, being in the business, would know how to handle it. My dad was a hands-off kind of guy. Sad, though, I have no one left to ask about any of this, though.” He winced at himself for that one, not wanting Connie to think that he was looking for sympathy as a way to get back in her good graces. “I have to be the detective,” he followed up with a faux laugh, saving face.

They were still standing, so she motioned him to one of the tables, where they sat, facing each other. She was silent for a moment, then took a deep breath. “I heard what you were up to last night. Three different people called me to let me know. I think it's great.”

He waved his hand at her, humbly. “Some opportunities presented themselves. Including that.” He

motioned to the flyer. "It was a desperate act by someone backed into a corner."

"Well, regardless, it was a good use of the resources."

Now, he laughed. "You know, I don't even know if that's true. To be honest, I don't know if taking that parcel off the tax rolls to make a museum is the best idea. I'm surprised that no one brought that up to me last night."

"I might've. If you'd called me." She paused, looking at him. "Why didn't you? I could've helped."

He sat back and sighed. "You know, I wanted to. But I thought you might've thought I was using the whole thing as an excuse to talk to you."

She didn't answer for a moment, then said matter-of-factly, "I wouldn't bring it up."

"Oh, I don't intend to. Hope it doesn't backfire."

"Seems like there's enough goodwill in this that it would be politically dangerous for someone to oppose you. When's the announcement?"

"I think the governor's office is already working on it."

"Stealing your thunder?"

He shook his head. "That's not what any of this is about."

She was quiet again. "I was hard on you." He started to push back, but she kept on, "No, I was. I don't think I was wrong in doing so, but wanted you to understand why, Martin. You have your life. You're a single guy. You're driven, with ambition and political aspirations. And I'm happy for you. I'm happy for you that this situation appears to be going in your favor. I'm happy to help however I can. But you have to understand, I'm not on the same trajectory." He nodded with her, seeing where she was going. "I'm a single mom and a small business owner. I appreciate that you see me as a confidant, and that you've come in here many times over the past few weeks... But this big picture stuff you're working on, Martin? It just doesn't fit into my daily schedule. It escalated and escalated and got to be too much. I'm sorry. I want to be a better friend. But I sweat the small stuff here. That day you walked in with Vinny Scazzafava-

"I know," he said. "I get it."

In truth, he should've gotten it before, and only now as she was explaining it was he seeing the light. What she

was saying was true, and it was his selfishness tied to the entire situation that was driving it. Why did he think that he could just walk into her place and drag her into his problems any time he wanted to? Because *he* wanted to?

“Again, Martin,” she continued, “I want to be a good friend, but it was just too much. I needed to distance myself.”

“No, it was insensitive of me,” noticing that she kept saying the word friend to him, and wondering if he should be reading into it. “When this all started, you were one of my only supporters, and you stuck by me. I guess I read that as some kind of camaraderie, and I... I don’t know... Abused it, I guess.”

“Martin, no. It’s just reality. I simply didn’t have the capacity to be what you needed me to be. I have to put my family and my business first. That’s not a knock at you. You’re a big picture thinker, and this situation required exactly that. Your approach seems to have worked out for you. But I think you’ll see – or, you are seeing – that the little stuff is really where it’s at.”

He nodded. Was it true? He had no idea, searching his mind for any behaviors he’d engaged in the past few weeks that reflected that growth. The closest he came was how his perception of the situation changed when he met Scott Belanger, and suddenly felt responsibility for protecting him, Tim and their friend’s family from what Peter was doing. He supposed that was along the lines of what Connie was talking about, but didn’t know if it would fit her criteria, so he held off on bringing it up.

“I believe I am learning that. And I promise to respect that boundary.” He paused, then leaned forward to her. “Thank you for taking the time to explain it to me. I do understand.”

“Well, I appreciate that you’re trying to.”

Sensing there was more to come for them, he wanted to wrap a bow on the conversation, but was coming up with nothing.

Fortunately, she did it for him. “Do you think you can have any movement on the site before the election? That would be a huge help.”

He shrugged. “No clue. I hope so.” Then, he laughed and leaned back in the chair. “Oh, you didn’t hear what happened in front of the judge yet.” He glanced toward the kitchen. “You have time for a quick story?”

She nodded.

“Let’s just say I think Miranda’s campaign might be in trouble.”

## CHAPTER 41

*Clearwater, FL – Six Weeks Later*

Peter Blythe sat at a table alone, the server, a pretty young girl who didn't need the dark make-up she wore, or the blue tips on the end of her shoulder-length hair, having just taken his drink order while he perused the menu. He'd been to Frenchy's Rockaway Grill a few times before, passing through Clearwater many times over the years on business, and while he always got the grilled grouper sandwich, was determined to try something different. Fish tacos, maybe. Though, he knew that by the time she got back with his drink, he'd have moved back to the same sandwich anyway. Creature of habit.

The reality that he was a creature of habit was becoming increasingly frustrating after his plot in Jersey had failed. His last-ditch effort to make something of himself. He'd tried to convince himself that the adventure, itself, was accomplishment enough – *it's not the journey, but the destination* – but knew it wasn't true. The plan he'd so well laid out had fallen victim, in the end, to what was right. Not in his eyes, but in the world's. He had to admit it – everything he'd wanted to happen was part of a scheme. He'd couched it as some kind of representation of his loyalty to his deceased friend, but it was really all about going out with a bang. Instead, he'd gone out with nothing more than a fizzle.. And it was aggravating.

Not defeating, he thought, as the girl brought him his Old Fashioned, and he sipped it, grinning that he'd gotten his money's worth on the bourbon. Like any loss in life, he knew that he'd wallow for a bit, then get back on his horse. Though, this time, for the first time in a very long time, he didn't know which direction that horse would be heading.

Like any loss, too, he'd spent weeks, now, contemplating the "what if..." How things might've gone differently. What individual things had happened that turned the situation against him. Had he underestimated his primary opponent, Ebel? Did his friends turn on him at exactly the wrong moment? If Randy had held on just a little bit longer? Or, was his entire plan doomed from the start, the moment that Ebel's step-father showed him the handwritten flyer?

Forty years.

Forty years of waiting, planning and hoping, only to come up empty. That's a story that few people can tell, and one that today was wrought with disappointment, but tomorrow might be able to inspire someone else not to make the same mistakes.

"Don't do what I did," he muttered to himself, taking another sip from his drink as a vacationing family slid behind him *en route* to their own table.

He watched them for a moment with melancholy, then felt someone to his right, and turned to find his server. Summoning up a smile through his malaise, he ordered the grouper sandwich as if on script, and faced front again.

With a sigh, he reached inside his sport coat pocket – the salesman in him could never let go of his business attire, even if it was the Florida version of it – and pulled out a yellow, padded security envelope, which had been folded in half to fit. He straightened it, setting it on the table in front of him. On the front side, facing up, the envelope was already addressed, with postage affixed, to Martin Ebel, Mayor, Boro of Seaside Heights.

Swearing under his breath, he reached into his other pocket, and pulled out a business card. It was the same design he'd been carrying around for decades: *Peter Blythe, Salesman*. Ironic, because out of everything he'd

sold, and he'd sold it all... The only one that mattered to him, really, was the one transaction he couldn't close.

Pulling out a pen, he flipped the business card to the back and wrote, "To the winner goes the spoils. Well-played. – PB," and stuffed the card into the open envelope. Next, he reached inside his linen shirt and looped his finger into gold chain that dangled from his neck, pulling out the engagement ring that he hadn't taken off since he was a teenager. For the first time, he unclasped the necklace and slid the ring off into his hand. As he felt the cold metal and ran his fingers over the setting, memories of that night – being rebuffed by David Alden in the jewelry store – flooded back to him. Scott. Double T. Randy. Their trust in him shaken. If it had ever actually been trust, in the first place. He liked to believe that their summer was spent building something together, and not just three guys following him around for something to do. That one, he was going to give himself.

Finding himself ready to move on, he opened his hand and dropped the ring into the envelope, sealing it up and sliding it to the side. Then, he reached for his drink, which he noticed was already almost needing a refill.

"Mister Blythe," he heard a voice behind him.

He cringed, then looked up at the ceiling and took a deep breath. It was the voice he'd imagined since he'd left New Jersey. Or, the type of voice he'd imagined. Gruff. Accented. Imposing.

Italian.

Slowly, he turned in his chair, swinging his legs to the side and looking up at two men, both over six feet, wearing pedestrian jeans, black golf shirts and leather jackets – one brown, one tan. They could have been brothers from their looks, and probably were, but their look and demeanor were completely out of place in this fun, Gulf Coast family restaurant directly on the beach.

His heart was about to beat out of his chest, but he attempted to look calm outwardly. He held his hand out toward the table. "Care to join me? I just ordered, but if you get your order in now, I'm sure they can time everything together."



“We need to talk,” the man on the right, who was about an inch taller than the other, said. “Let’s go for a walk.”

He sighed again, and looked back and forth to both of them. Was this really it? Had he come this far only to be mowed down for something that had happened 40 years ago, that he wasn’t even responsible for? What a terrible ending. Strange what goes through your head when you’re about to be disappeared, he thought.

Peter nodded and stood, dwarfed by the men who’d approached him. Not completely in height, but in how they imposed themselves on the environment. The man who’d spoken held out his hand toward the exit and he took a step in that direction before remembering the envelope, which he turned and grabbed, dropping a \$20 bill on the table to cover his drink. Conscientiously, he perused the dining area for his server to let her know that he wouldn’t be needing his meal, or any other, possibly ever, but couldn’t find her. He gave up, figuring there were worse things than being impolite.

They passed the host stand and a small t-shirt shop that had been set up by the entrance, and as the parking lot came into view, a black extended Lincoln Town Car sat idling at the end of the sidewalk. He glanced back to the men following him, but he didn’t need any further instruction as to where he was supposed to go.

Strangely, he smiled to himself as he approached the door to the car. Despite this last disappointment, he’d lived a good life. He’d seen a lot of the country, the world. More, certainly, than Scott, who’d stayed holed up in South Jersey his whole life. Poor bastard. Making a good living for himself and finding stability. He scoffed at the thought of it.

Not requiring an escort, he willingly opened the door to the car, taking one last look around at the beach scene. Families, children, ran everywhere, going on about their business. A father was trying to figure out the parking meter just on the other side of the parked Town Car. To his left, a family was loading up their beach cart for the trek across the hot sand, down to the water. He thought it was very peaceful, and a wonderful contrast to what was waiting for him inside the car.

Having delayed enough, Peter ducked his head and slid into the back of the car. Not surprisingly, sitting across from him was Vincent Scazzafava, Jr., the son of the man he and his friends had wronged so long ago.

Surprisingly, though, sitting next to *him* was Martin Ebel.

A slight smile crossed his face, despite not knowing how they would take it. As he looked back and forth between them, the hulks that had greeted him shut the car door behind him. It was just the three of them.

“I have to admit, Mayor,” he started, “this is the first time since this all started where I didn’t see you coming at all.”

“I’m okay with that,” Ebel deadpanned.

“Mister Scazzafava, it’s a pleasure to meet you,” he continued. “I’ve read a lot about you, and despite what happened that summer, I’ve been fascinated by your father’s story. Seems like he was a great man. I’m sorry for your loss.”

Scazzafava was unmoved, just staring at him, expressionless, leaning forward on the seat with his hand holding his chin. Peter knew it was intimidation, building off of his reputation and alleged family history, the scenario itself, and the promise of some kind of retribution. But, to Peter, the walk to the car was intimidating enough. He didn’t need the big show, so he matched his demeanor as best he could, letting him know that even if Scazzafava was going to have him thrown off a bridge or something, he wasn’t going to win the psychological battle.

Scazzafava broke the silence, gesturing to Martin. “You know, you owe this man an apology.”

Peter laughed and looked at the floor of the car between them. “I don’t know if I do.”

“How’s that?”

“I saved his campaign.” He turned to Ebel. “Mayor, you have to admit. If I don’t show up in your office, you’re headed for the unemployment line in January.” He remembered the envelope in his hand, and held it out to Ebel. “Oh, and this is for you. I was just about to drop it in the mail.”

Ebel took the envelope skeptically and set it on his lap, just as the other two men got into either side of the front seats of the car, and pulled away. Scazzafava continued. "My father loved this guy, and charged me with taking care of him after he got him his watch back. I can't tell you how much that watch meant to my father. Before he died, he told me that he wanted whoever was responsible for taking it from him to pay a price." He shook his head. "Now, I don't know if it was you or one of your friends that did it, but you're the only one whose name I have, which is why you're sitting here. So, my father left me with two things to do: take care of this guy, and hunt you down."

He paused for quite some time, letting those words hang in the air. Hunt Peter down. Which, he knew, of course, was happening, and was why he hadn't sat still since the day he'd left South Jersey. Over the past six weeks or so, he'd been in eighteen different states, trying to leave as little a trail behind him as possible. In fact, by the time Ebel had received the package he'd been just about to send, Peter had already planned to be long gone from Florida. He wasn't going to interrupt Scazzafava right then, but before whatever happened happened, he'd want to know how they finally caught up with him.

"So, this guy... He's going to win his election now. And I ask him what else he needs. That my father says let's make sure this guy goes all the way. And you know what he says? He says he doesn't want anything to happen to you or your friends." Scazzafava nodded at him, grinning, like he was blown away with the turn of events. "Can you believe that? You try to screw him, and he says leave you alone."

"Well, I appreciate that," Peter said, noticing a flatness in his voice that normally wasn't there. Was it humility, or did he just realize how close he was to paying the price?

"But you see, now, I'm in the middle," Scazzafava continued, Peter sneaking glances out the window to see where they might be headed. He knew Clearwater Beach well, and noticed that they seemed to just be moving randomly through the tourist areas. "My dad told me two things. And I don't know which one was more important to him. I have to make an interpretation on that, myself."

Do I make you pay? Or, at the request of the mayor, do I not?"

Peter instinctively looked to Ebel, who made eye contact, then looked to Scazzafava.

"One thing you need to know about me," Scazzafava said, his voice darkening, "is that I don't like one-way-or-the-other decisions. I like to find a way to do both. And I think that's what my father would want."

"Okay," Peter said. "What does that mean?" He noticed the car stopped, and stole a look outside to see where. It looked like one of the many marinas that lined the intercoastal waterway, the sun glinting off of yachts bobbing in the water.

Scazzafava took a deep breath. "It means we're not going to do anything to hurt you." He paused, giving Peter a split second to stifle a sigh of relief. "If..."

"Of course."

"If... You apologize to Mayor Ebel for trying to set him up."

Now, the sigh finished, but it was a different kind. Having to apologize to Ebel after forty years of chasing his own retribution for what had happened was nearly as bad as being canceled by the mob and left for dead in the water here.

Ebel caught the sigh, and spoke for the first time. "This is Mister Scazzafava's request, Peter. I'm not fishing for an apology."

"Nonetheless," Scazzafava said.

"You know what that is, in the envelope, there?" Peter diverted. "Take a look."

Cautiously, Ebel picked up the envelope and ripped off the top of it, emptying the contents into his hand. He bypassed the card and took the engagement ring between two fingers, looking up at Peter. "Is this?"

"It is."

Now, Ebel sighed, holding the ring out to Scazzafava. "This is the last piece we were looking for. A widow who lives down here said it was stolen on the Fourth of July that year."

"Is that apology enough? Atonement for my past misdeeds?"

Scazzafava shook his head. "Not for me. Not for my dad."

"You're going to toss me in the water if I don't say it?"

The two looked at each other. "Is it really that difficult?" Vinny Jr. asked.

"He won the war. He's going to win the election. He made national news by being a good guy. He made friends with you and your dad." He leaned forward, toward them. "I even got him to finally go through those photos that he promised his father he would. Is there more to say?"

Scazzafava didn't answer. Just continued to stare at him.

After a regrettable and quiet moment, Peter nodded, more to himself than to them, then to them, and then took a deep breath, gearing up for something that 17-year-old Peter Blythe would probably disown him for. He looked up at Ebel. "Mayor Ebel, I am sorry that I tried to set you up." He tried not to look to Scazzafava for approval, instead remaining focused on Ebel. The mayor nodded, predictably, and Peter motioned again to the ring. "I hope that helps to show that I'm being genuine."

Ebel held the ring up. "This is big. I appreciate it."

Now, he looked to Scazzafava, who had a smile on his face. The tension inside the car immediately subsided, and Peter sat back on his seat. "Where can we drop you?" Scazzafava asked.

"Well, I wouldn't mind finishing my dinner back at Frenchy's." He paused. "But, I was wondering if Mayor Ebel might be interested in joining me, before heading back to Jersey."

"Why would he want to do that?"

Ebel answered for him. "Because Peter probably had a better relationship with my father toward the end than I ever did. Yes, I'd love to spend some time reminiscing with you."

"My treat," Peter said, then motioned to Scazzafava. "Of course, you're welcome to join us."

"No," he shook his head. "Sounds like the two of you can have a much better conversation under these different circumstances." He reached back and pounded the glass dividing them from the driver. It rolled town an inch.

“Take us back to the restaurant,” he called through the gap.

They drove back to the restaurant where Peter and Ebel spent the next couple hours talking about their favorite photographer and his many bannings from online forums.

Scazzafava called the restaurant and paid their bill.

## CHAPTER 42

“I am excited that we are now able to capture more than one hundred years of history here in this wonderful location,” said Governor Francine Devereaux, standing behind a sharp cherry wood podium with the New Jersey state seal affixed to the front of it, a half-dozen microphones pointed toward her. She was surrounded by a semi-circle of cameras, and behind them more than 100 supporters, dignitaries, residents and guests who had come for the big day. “When Mayor Ebel came to me with the idea, and with the generous contribution of his father’s collection of photographs, I knew that we had an opportunity that doesn’t come along all the time. This museum will be a hallmark of any visit to Seaside Heights and the Jersey Shore, and it is with great pleasure that I introduce our partner in this effort, soon-to-be-reelected Seaside Heights Mayor Martin Ebel.”

Martin smiled and gave the crowd a quick wave as they applauded and he approached Devereaux. They shook hands, and she pulled him in for what likely appeared to everyone present to be a quick, professional hug. But, in reality, when she leaned in, she whispered, “You’re welcome,” into his ear. It was a platitude he was willing to go along with, since she now appeared to be in his corner.

As he made his way to the podium for his comments, the events of the last several months flashed through his mind, reminding him how he’d gotten to this very place. Because it was only as recently as early summer that he was headed for a brutal stomping in his upcoming election, and now he was in the enviable position of having the

governor swing into town to join him for a press conference just days before Election Day. Typically, this kind of move would be used to bolster an incumbent who might be in peril. Today's visit was a little different, however – it was Devereaux who wanted to be close to Martin, due to his national renown surrounding the rescue of stolen jewelry, not to mention his newfound friendship with some of the more powerful unions in the state. Polls were indicating that Martin's re-election was well in hand. Nothing was etched in stone, of course, but Sanderson-Cox hadn't been heard from in a while. Martin had heard that with fundraising drying up, she'd made the decision not to spend her own money on a suddenly losing cause, seeing the writing on the wall. Which easily paved the way for the governor to fast-track funding to the project, and get the remodel done in time for the election to seal the deal.

He hadn't wanted to admit it in the car with Vinny Jr., but Blythe had been right. Had he not shown up, instead of standing next to the governor he would've been sitting in his dining room at home trying to figure out his next step in life, unopened boxes of his father's pictures sitting on the bureau. He owed him at least that. At their dinner in Florida, which had turned out to be a very pleasant experience for him, Blythe had walked him through the saga that had played out over four decades, kicked off by Martin's father and step-father working together in a way he hadn't even envisioned could've happened. That, as it turned out, was a piece of the puzzle that Blythe hadn't even been able to put together, still believing after all these years that the handwritten flyer that had changed the course of his life was "official."

But, now here he was, about to give the concluding comments before the official ribbon-cutting for the new Seaside Heights Photographic Museum, and the opening of the newly-refurbished building to the public (notwithstanding the VIP cocktail party that had been held there the evening before).

He set his hands on the podium and looked out to the crowd, searching for someone specific. After a moment, he found her, standing to the right of the cameras, her



two daughters beside her. Connie caught his eye, and flashed him a curled Irish smile that invigorated him, and he gave the slightest of nods in return, imperceptible to anyone but the two of them.

“Thank you, everyone, for being here this morning,” he started, then affording himself a deep breath before embarking on the biggest speech he’d ever given. “In truth, the concept we’re launching today started way back in the early nineteen hundreds, when developers began to market our great community as a viable summer destination. More than one hundred years later, Seaside Heights is an institution for hundreds of thousands of vacationers each year, and I agree with Governor Devereaux that that’s something we should celebrate.”

Anyone used to seeing Martin Ebel give speeches might have noticed an absence of his usual notes. No, he wanted this one to be the kick-off for the rest of his political career, and he’d spent significant time going through it, word-by-word, to make sure that his intonation and enthusiasm matched the message he was delivering. You know, like anyone that gave professional speeches should have been doing all along. This was a new, reborn Mayor Ebel.

“I’m not going to go so far as to call it coincidence, rather than good fortune, that it’s my father’s photos from the nineteen seventies that will be included as one of the museum’s first exhibits. I am extremely honored to have had the opportunity to be the caretaker of Richard Ebel’s photos, and am thrilled that they have found a home here, where they belong. Richard loved this beach, he loved the people and he loved this community. I do hope everyone enjoys his photos for generations to come.”

He tried not to look at Connie, but couldn’t help himself. She was smirking. She knew the stories. Richard Ebel was a curmudgeon who took pictures of people because it amused him. Martin knew that if his father was standing there with him, he’d be scowling at best, or actually steering people away from the museum, at the worst.

“I want to thank the Seaside Heights Historical Society for their role in preserving our community’s history throughout the years, and their generous contributions to

the museum, which, as you'll see in a few moments, include photos from the earliest days from the Senate Amusement Company of Philadelphia, the infamous fire of 1955, and, of course, the story of destruction and heroic rebuild following Hurricane Sandy. I know you'll be inspired."

He paused, gearing up for his big finish, at which point the dignitaries on hand would gather around as he and Devereaux – and Kelly Hanover, as per his promise – use a giant pair of gold scissors (provided by the governor's office) to officially cut the opening ribbon.

"It's all of you that made this happen," he continued. "Which is why you were invited here today. Each and every day, keeping this community running, and making sure that our entertainment and amusement district is safe, welcoming and for everyone. This museum, as you'll see on the plaque right at the entrance, is dedicated to you, the business owners and workers of Seaside Heights, from the past century. Thank you for your efforts and dedication." He looked behind him. "Thank you to Governor Devereaux for your commitment to our great community. Thank you to our state and county leaders. And what do you say we check this place out?"

The crowd cheered, but Martin held up his hands. "Bear with us. You're not seeing the finished product yet." They couldn't possibly have gotten everything they'd wanted up-and-running in time, but the building renovation had been expedited, and several displays were ready to open for visitors in time to provide Martin a boost for the election. As he turned to meet the others standing around him, shaking their hands, the governor's staff popped in with a long, gold ribbon and everyone grabbed a piece of it, pulling it taut. To the flash of cameras, Martin, Devereaux and Hanover collaborated on negotiating the giant scissors, slicing the ribbon in two, and the crowd cheered again, before starting to file into the building.

After greeting a number of constituents, all who wished him good luck for the upcoming election – including two business owners who had been firmly in Sanderson-Cox's camp, and clearly wanted some facetime

with the soon-to-be re-elected mayor – Martin searched the crowd once again for Connie. After not seeing her immediately, he started toward where she was, almost running into Scott Belanger. He stopped and they shook hands.

“Glad you could make it,” Martin said.

“I had to. I’ve never been the subject of a museum exhibit before.”

Martin laughed. “Well, for a number of reasons, maybe that should remain a secret.”

Belanger motioned to a man standing next to him that Martin hadn’t noticed. “Mayor, I think you met Tim at the courthouse.”

“Yes, the fourth horseman,” Martin said, taking his outstretched hand. “Thanks for coming down from...” He waited, realizing he had no idea.

“Connecticut,” Turner finished it for him. “I knew your father. He was a great guy.”

A smile crossed Martin’s face. “Well, maybe let’s not go that far. He was a good guy.”

They laughed. “Well, I’m glad to see him being honored here. He was a big part of the history that summer.”

“Have you heard from Peter at all?” Belanger asked.

Martin tried to read into the question to see if Belanger already knew the answer to that, but the look on his face told him no. He shook his head slowly. “No, not in a while. You know, I toyed with the idea of including his name in my comments there-”

“He wouldn’t have wanted you to,” Belanger said. “None of this was ever about fame for him.”

“What was it about?”

Belanger thought for a moment, then looked at Turner. “Keeping his word,” he said, turning back to Martin. “Honor?”

He nodded, then clapped his hand on Belanger’s arm. “Something we could all do better with, huh?”

The realtor smiled wryly. “*We’re* not politicians.”

“Ah, that’s hitting below the belt.”

They enjoyed a laugh together, probably the last interaction he’d have with them, Martin realized, and then Belanger motioned with his head toward the front

door of the new museum. “We won’t hold you up. Congratulations on this, and good luck in the election.”

Martin nodded his thanks, shook hands with them again, and then they disappeared down the ramp and into the building. Most of the crowd had funneled in now, leaving only about fifteen people mingling out on the Boardwalk. None of them were Connie, so Martin started inside, himself.

She wasn’t inside, either, he realized once he’d gotten in, and was among the attendees, looking at the array of exhibits and surrounding a table that had been set up with plastic glasses of wine and various treats. Confused at where she’d gone, hoping she didn’t get called back to the shop, he also noticed that the governor and her team had skedaddled, so he took a breath and settled in to enjoy the grand opening. Stopping to speak with random people as he strolled the floor, he instinctively ended up standing in front of his favorite exhibit, a collection of late 1970s photos taken by photographer Richard Ebel, who, incidentally, was the deceased father of the boro’s current mayor.

Encased in glass, Richard’s photos were arranged chronologically by the dates that were on the envelopes they came in, spreading from 1976 through the early ‘80s, when, Martin remembered, Richard had gotten a job as a car salesman – a role he’d done fairly well in before eventually moving to Florida. At the center of the display case was a featured collection about the infamous pickpocket ring of 1979, featuring a number of candid photos of people on the Boardwalk having their valuables pilfered by various teenagers whose faces couldn’t be identified. Given the events of the last few months, the exhibit was the hit of the museum, and Martin could hear the throng of people gathered around and peering inside asking questions amongst themselves about who the “other three” thieves were. He smiled, knowing that the best, most recognizable picture of the crew was sitting back at his house, now framed and atop his bedroom dresser, a testament to the power of expecting the unexpected.

He felt someone sidle next to him, and turned to find Connie, immediately causing a smile to go through him. She was holding a small paper plate, which she held out to him.

"I grabbed you one," she said, directing him to a dark chocolate turtle. "They're going fast."

"Ooo, thank you," he said, pinching it between his thumb and forefinger, and taking a bite. "Where'd you go?"

"I didn't expect the first batch to go quite so quickly. Had to go get some more. Big hit, I guess."

"Well, do what you need," he said through chews. "We'll cover the cost."

She crumpled up the plate in her hands as he finished, joining him in looking at the display. "Long road to get here, huh?"

"Longer than I would've liked."

He felt her hand come up behind him and squeeze his arm. "You did well."

"You never count your chickens before they hatch, but I feel good about the election."

She used his arm to turn him to her, looking up at him with a sarcastic smile. "You know that's not what I mean."

Noticing a new throng of people trying to make their way to the glass casing, he stepped aside and Connie followed. Now, he looked back to her and smiled. "No?"

"What you did with Peter Blythe. With the stolen items. What you did here. What you did with your father's photos? Those are the important things."

"Yes, I suppose." He was grinning.

She shook her head, not smiling with him. "You know teasing me doesn't work."

"I do," he said, nodding. "I do."

Rob Kahovec, who owned one of the surf shops on the Seaside Park end of the Boardwalk got his attention for a moment. "Great job, Mayor. This is really wonderful."

"Thanks, Robbie," he said, smiling and patting him on the back as he continued on.

"I'll tell you, I didn't think you had it in you," Connie continued. "You should've seen yourself that day when you came into my shop. 'Look at my new mafia friend.'"

I'm so cool." She did a little dance to show Martin how cool he thought he was at the time.

He laughed. "Stop. I get it."

"You know what my favorite part was, though?"

"What's that?"

She paused for a moment, holding eye contact with him that went right through him. "That you personally delivered that woman's engagement directly to her house in Florida."

He put his head down, knowing he was blushing, then waved his hand at her. "Ah, it was just the right thing to do."

"Well, it's the thing that's going to get you that first date. When you ask, of course."

Then, she turned and walked away, leaving him standing alone, in the midst of about a hundred people milling about the museum. He waited for the dramatic turn back and smile over her shoulder, but it never came. He had his marching orders.

He indulged in a grin as his mind contemplated his next move, but was interrupted by another constituent congratulating him on his success and wishing him luck.

Then another. Then another.

One thing at a time.

But he wasn't going to put Connie off for long.

The new Martin Ebel did not procrastinate.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Several years ago, I scribbled a note about the idea of using my father, a photographer, and my step-father, a jeweler, in some kind of crime novel. You see, I had a bunch of stories from them, both not with us anymore, that I knew were something: My father, “Bootstrap Bill” Turner, on whom Richard Ebel is based, was famous in photographer circles for walking the beach (in Florida) and snapping shots of anything that interested him, including hundreds of photos of a specific fence. My step-father, Peter Ward, my “Pop”, who provided the foundation for David Alden in the story, had his own jewelry shop for many years, and gave me far too many great stories to fit in one novel.

The idea sat for a long time, before I mentioned it to a colleague casually. “You have to write it,” he said, almost as an admonition. I took it to heart, and started working on a concept. Little did I know that I’d have the opportunity to put something together that took me down so many memory lanes, in a setting where I grew up, that I felt like I was got to spend time with both of them. What a treat.

Special thanks go to some folks I never would’ve even considered knowing when I first put pen to paper. Greg Kohr, from Kohr’s Custard, and Michael “Frenchy” Preston from Frenchy’s restaurants, who allowed me to use the names of their businesses in the story. Each of them helped to make the story authentic, and meant a lot to me. Thanks to Kristina Park and the team at Amplify Clearwater, and Colleen Dingman, for helping to make the connect to Frenchy.



Thank you to Cassandra Santa Maria, again, for her incredible work on the cover design. Each book, I send her a few notes and images, and she comes back to me with gold. This one, after she sent me her first take on it, I had to admit to her that I sat there grinning at it like a fool for ten minutes.

To my kids, who I never could have dreamed would love the Jersey Shore, where I grew up, as much as I do, and to my sister, Christine and my New Jersey crew, for always going with us to the Boardwalk, no matter how many hours we want to spend there. I hope that capturing these memories and the environment, even in fiction, means as much to all of you as it did me to write it.

To my Dad's photography friends on Facebook – and there are so many of them. He passed away in 2011, and I am so moved every year on his birthday, January 31, when people pop onto his Facebook page and let me know they're thinking of him. The sections of this book telling of Richard's exploits on photography message boards are based on my father's real-life shenanigans, which many remember fondly. He had quite an online following.

To Uncle Butch who has plenty of references in the story. One of my favorite Seaside stories growth up that I tell to this day was Uncle Butch letting my cousins play the clown-balloon water gun game, but at the last minute a teenager came up and joined... Forcing him into the game (which he won). As a parent now, I think of the look on his face every time I feel like our family is endlessly pouring money into Boardwalk games.

To my Aunt Laura, who heartbreakingly passed away just as we were about to publish this book. Aunt Laura was the most beautiful lady – she had no kids of her own, but took care of all of her nieces and nephews as though we were. Though she moved to Florida several years ago, she is inextricably tied to every positive memory and good thought I have about New Jersey.

Finally, to my Mom, Barbara, who is the glue to every single memory and image that went into writing this book. The opening scene – the rained-out 4th of July fireworks in 1979... That's where my Pop proposed to her. I was standing next to them and had no clue. And the memories and references go on from there. None of this story is told without her.

Hope you enjoy the book!  
- Craig

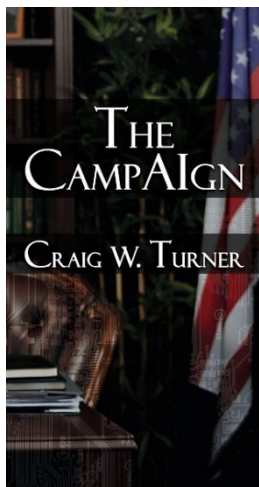
## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Craig W. Turner is the author of ten (10) books, including his political thrillers, the *THE CAMPaiGN* and *THE KINGMAKER*, and his non-fiction books on running effective local political campaigns. With more than 25 years' experience in media, PR, economic development, campaign management and government relations, his newest novel, *THE INFAMOUS JERSEY SHORE PICKPOCKET RING OF 1979* pulls directly from his experiences in recognition that often real life can be even more interesting than fiction.

Craig is founder and president of Momentum Public Affairs, a public relations and marketing firm headquartered in Western New York. A veteran political consultant, Craig also founded *The Campaign Coach*, a national campaign management and training program for first-time local candidates, in 2015.

Craig W. Turner's The CampAIgn  
Get it at Amazon.com



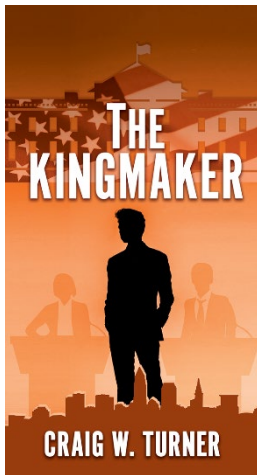
Restaurateur Charles Denz has always had political aspirations, and when his good friend, the Mayor of Lakeside, a small city in Upstate New York, tells him that he's retiring and wants Charles to take the seat, he's all in. The fact that Republicans have held the office for a half-century certainly helps make the case.

In Washington, Democrats have been pitched a new concept: running an artificial intelligence entity for office. The technology is ready, but polling shows America is not, so they authorize throwing some resources at a pilot project in a local race where they might not otherwise have a chance. A nationwide search leads them to Lakeside, New York.

Now, this quiet community is the battleground for man vs. machine, and the walk-right-in race that Charles envisioned has become an expensive, globally-televised and life-changing fight to the finish.

*"Utterly original and uniquely fascinating"*

Craig W. Turner's **THE KINGMAKER**  
Get it at [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)

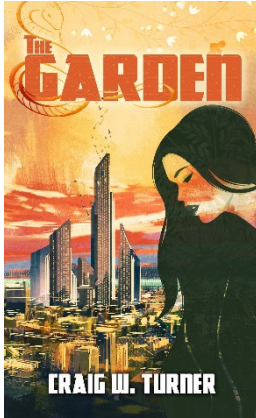


Ben Hathaway, a rising star in Cleveland politics, took one for the team. To protect his boss – and his career – he served three years in prison for a diabolical campaign scheme gone bad. Never said a word. Now that he's out and looking to get back on track, though, the people he was so loyal to have turned their backs on him.

Hell bent on revenge, he decides to take on the world alone and starts his own consulting firm. But things are going slowly, and feelings of defeat are creeping in. In the cutthroat world of local politics, for Ben the writing is on the wall – his comeback is not meant to be.

Ben's hopes are revived, however, when he's approached by a mysterious and well-funded organization with an impossible task for him: win an unwinnable race for Cleveland city council that for a reason unbeknownst to him has national implications. He's back in the spotlight, in a position to achieve his loftiest goals, and facing stakes that he never even imagined existed. But first, he must figure out who hired him, what they're after, and why they believe he's the guy to get the job done.

Craig W. Turner's THE GARDEN  
Get it at Amazon.com



It is 2109, and Dr. Landon Tripathi arrives in Greensboro, NC as India's new representative at the international Space and Time Program, known as SATP (SAT-pee), full of ideas and promise. Less than 48 hours into his new role, though, SATP is in the crosshairs of the U.S. President, details of his predecessor's mysterious disappearance surface, and the organization's world-renowned hero, Dr. Robert Mulvaney, is being accused of using time travel to perpetrate some of the worst crimes in history. To save SATP, and themselves, Landon and his new colleagues must beat the clock to undertake the most ambitious time travel mission in the history of the program – to the Garden of Eden, where science and religion will clash in a debate that suddenly is no longer limited to doctrines and theories.

*"An enjoyable and unique sci-fi story"*