

STEVE McMANUS

RED FLAG



CITY OF ANGELS/DEAD ON ARRIVAL • CODA BOOK 1

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City of Angels/Dead on Arrival

CODA Book 1

by

Steve McManus

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Cover design by Denis Lenzi

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First eBook Edition: August 2015

ISBN 978-0-9964485-3-6

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For Kellie and Paloma, Theresa and Kevin, Mike and Sheila.

Special thanks to Sheila Rees (without whom...), Leslie Johnson and Diana Finch.

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RED FLAG

CHAPTER 1

Danny Kasho walked briskly out of the bulging semi-circular atrium of Van Nuys Courthouse West as if he'd been prematurely disgorged from the pregnant belly of Lady Justice herself. He nonchalantly swept some presumptuous fool's notepad and Diet Coke can off one of the waist-high marble walls flanking the stairs and claimed the end spot as his, laying his charcoal leather Louis Vuitton messenger bag on top, careful to keep his courtroom drawings flat inside and eyeing the people coming out of the building as he loosened his tie with two fingers. Only one of the two exit doors sandwiched between the employee and public entrances was in use today and the general egress was especially slow.

He posted a quick update to his blog: Court adjourned for the weekend. Lawyers and judge debating Byzantine—which was hard to type with his phone's meddling autocorrect—rules of law. Trial starts Wednesday. Prosecution has to be praying Patron plays let's make a deal before then.

At one time or another, either for a story or a serviceable bathroom without a line, Danny had been into nearly all of the buildings that comprised the innocuously-named Van Nuys Civic Center—the unremarkable east courthouse for civil and family cases, the slightly taller glass-fronted west courthouse for felonies, misdemeanors and traffic violations, which looked across the plaza at the backside of the Valley Municipal Building with its Art Deco friezes, eight-story tower and rosette stonework. It was a shrunken version of LA's famous city hall downtown and an outpost of civic services found there, containing field offices for the mayor and the city attorney and legal or financial departments of a dozen local agencies, as well as being the headquarters of the Council of Governments for the San Fernando Valley cities. Rounding out the judicial/municipal ecosystem was an LAPD police station and a jail and a great many bail bondsmen and lawyers with storefronts in the surrounding streets. Van Nuys Courthouse West was always a busy place, especially when a high-profile trial like this one was underway.

Danny blogged for a regional crime news website called City of Angels/Dead on Arrival—CODA.com, which had been a fledgling upstart when he joined in 2010 as a paid intern for a dime above minimum wage. He bought a used police scanner off Craigslist, borrowed a camera from a neighbor, maxed out a credit card for a laptop and a Dictaphone and dove into the darkness, mortgaging his life on his eventual success, or at least comfortable self-sufficiency, preferably sooner rather than later. He ran up the miles on a pre-owned Honda and brought back nightly tales of felonies and felons young and old to fill CODA's daily output. Tips started paying his rent and he became a regular at most of the forty superior court locations spread out around LA, and had been to Van Nuys many times over the years. Viewers around the country had too, beginning in 1993

with the Menendez brothers in their ugly sweaters, post-parental shotgunning. Or with angry former TV star Robert Blake, white-haired in a pallbearer's suit, acquitted in 2005 of shooting his wife in their car outside one of Danny's favorite Italian restaurants in the Valley which had since undergone a radical and disappointing renovation. Blake's karma had been suitably shitty ever since.

The standard group of court reporters was emerging piecemeal into the thickening crowd in front of the building. They all knew each other but the different mediums were clubby—TV hung with TV, radio with radio, print with print. Bloggers like Danny were the free radicals undermining the system, the information hunter-gatherers who owed nothing to nobody.

Matronly Martha Simmons from the local CBS station pinched her glossy smoker's lips together as she hurried past in her kitten heels and peach Ann Taylor pantsuit. "No door duty today Danny?"

"You know I was just looking for that citizenship merit badge, Martha. I'm a people person. I'm a helper."

"Keep looking Danny, keep looking. And aren't you aiming a little high?"

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean."

Martha chuckled, "You will Danny, you will."

Except for when she was being cryptic with him he liked Martha—he'd gone drinking with her before and she was the real deal from back in the day, two or three decades ago. She was teasing him for being publicly castigated by an overzealous sheriff's deputy for holding the courthouse door open when they were all here yesterday. Reprimanding him right in front of everyone, a jury of his smirking peers but not, thank God, the object of his affection.

So today he changed his plan of attack, which was first, get here super early to grab one of the coveted seats in the back of the sixth-floor courtroom so he'd be among the first out the door, then bound down the stairs to avoid waiting at the elevators and nab the end spot at the marble wall nearest the doors, regardless of whether some fool left a Diet Coke and a notepad there in a queenie passive-aggressive attempt to reserve the location. Both items were so much litter in the dry plaza grass now. Shame on them. Yay for him.

And Phase One of Operation Voelker accomplished.

Milquetoast Eric Garvey from NBC followed close behind Martha. He was shucking off his sport coat with the cheesy elbow patches, eager to find a way through the spectators, participants, lawyers and journalists in transit, and people just loitering about on smoke breaks. Eric was jumpy, peering over heads to see what the hold-up was—maybe he was looking for a bathroom without a line. He was always squinting even when it wasn't this sunny out. Even when he was indoors. Even probably when he slept in his bedroom curtained with his collection of bad ties, of which he seemed in innumerable supply. "Kasho you make a better doorstep than a writer."

"Oh hey Mr. Magoo, have you ever seen your own eyes? Has anyone?"

“I can see how many people aren’t reading you perfectly well.”

“They’re too busy gawking at the ties your mom bought you for Christmas twenty years ago.”

Danny checked the exiting crowd and accidentally made eye contact with diminutive moon-faced Carlos Esquivel who was shooting the cuffs of his crisp little suit elaborately to draw attention to the animated face of his new watch. Carlos never seemed to be holding anything and barely carried a microphone even when he was on camera. He was an ex-morning anchor at his station recently demoted back to the field and he wasn’t taking it well.

“So this is how you make a living Kasho,” he tried to quip. “I forgot to tip you yesterday, let me see if I have some change. Can you break a single?”

The joke wasn’t so funny coming from wee Carlos. “Up your wife’s allowance chico, she isn’t paying me enough for my services. You keep her on a shorter leash than she wants me to.”

Wee Carlos started to retort but the exiting push of reporters and spectators swept him along like a little duckling. Dickhead.

One of the female Fox reporters who came and went in different flavors but who all had similar smiles as if they’d just bitten into a habanero chili pepper, something inhumanly spicy which had them right on the verge of screaming hysterically, was the apparent owner of the dispatched Diet Coke and notepad. This one was skinny and Asian and in her yellow and white cowlneck mini dress resembled a banana split on legs as she spun her stick-figure arms around herself in a windmill of bewilderment over Danny and his stuff occupying the space where *her* stuff was supposed to be.

He pointed helpfully toward the lawn. “That yours?”

She gaped at him. Her makeup-caked eyelids snapped like the jaws of a deep sea-dwelling fish hauled up out of the dark into a bright world of searing ambivalence. “What...the...*fuck?*”

Life is like a toilet bowl, Danny’s shrug seemed to say. You’re constantly confronted by assholes.

The Foxtress made an indignant noise in the back of her throat and clicked away to find a section of wall low enough for her to cross over onto the grass in her mini-dress and eighteen-inch nightclub heels. She was probably three feet tall without them.

At last Carrie Voelker from ABC strode out of the courthouse and the mid-morning sunshine tightened into her own personal spotlight. She gifted Danny with a dazzling smile as the wind played with her shiny blond hair in slow-motion, and while she passed in her black contoured boot-cut pants he indulged in a nice long look at her finest asset. She was her station’s newest court beat appointee and by far the best they’d ever had. The best anyone had ever had, with all due respect to Martha Simmons in her heyday. Even the chirping of the birds sounded like whistled catcalls from construction workers.

Danny grabbed his bag and pushed off the wall with a glance at the Foxtress who was tip-toeing through the crispy grass with her preposterous heels in one hand and her tiny nose wrinkled as if she was having to navigate a minefield of dog shit on top of everything else.

Carrie Voelker waited a few steps away so he could catch up. “Guilty as sin but will Charlize get him off again—this time for good? We’ll be live at five.”

“Is that how you’re going to position it?” Danny smiled, pleased as Patton driving through France. Mission accomplished.

“I’ll find some way to keep it from looking like a foregone conclusion,” she said. “What about you?”

“I’m going with the classic Greek tragedy—Man murders Wife, Man fakes death, Man runs off with Hot Secretary.”

“Executive hot secretary. I didn’t know CODA was into the classics.”

“We are when they look like Charlize Patron. Besides, ridding yourself of wifeypooh so you can hook up with the help is so old it’s practically biblical.”

They’d talked exactly once since pre-trial hearings began three weeks ago but he’d caught the occasional thrilling furtive glance from her. They’d smiled at each other and rolled their eyes at the necessary banality of courtroom proceedings and he’d been instantly smitten nose to toes. But whenever they had a spare moment either some advantageous interloper cut in or an overzealous sheriff’s deputy broke up the party and he’d been unable to reconnect with her. Hence today’s imperative success of Operation Voelker.

They stopped in the shade of a tree on the grassy pedestrian mall between the San Fernando Valley Constituent Service Center on the corner which contained more municipal government service branches and looked like a retail outlet, all tinted glass and earth tones, and an ugly federal building sheltering the local chapter of the IRS. The federal building was a plain concrete box with rows of narrow windows like arrow slits from which the taxmen and women could monitor the merchants in the temple—a smattering of ten by ten canopy tents set up in the plaza with vendors selling purses, jewelry, and clothing off draped folding tables. The food carts were good in a pinch but sometimes came back on you later. After Inglewood one side of the federal building had been cordoned off for repair but Danny noticed the tape was gone now so the tax collectors must be finally back to code.

Like a wartime news reel narrator he said, “But now—will true love prevail and Patron’s mysterious memory problems persist? Or will she finally come to what few senses she has and do her part to give Slick Nick first degree with special circumstances as a parting gift for their weeks of coital bliss on the beach?”

Carrie added, “For which she’ll earn herself a minimal sentence and eventually disappear into free obscurity, which once again proves that a woman’s emptiest head is still smarter than a man’s smallest head.”

“Assuming her IQ is bigger than her breasts.”

“Right? It’s hard to look remorseful with the size boobs he bought her. Maybe she can act sorry for *them*.”

Danny liked talking about boobs and little heads with Carrie Voelker. This was going better than he’d expected. He stole a glance at hers as she removed her blazer and folded it over her purse, a Jurassic-sized pearl-colored faux-leather tote with a double handle and pockets on the outside, her fashionable version of his carry-all Louis Vuitton messenger bag. Like everything else about Carrie Voelker her breasts were, in Danny’s learned opinion, absolutely exquisite, and decorated today by a long beaded necklace that drew his eyes helplessly down into their warm snugness beneath a raspberry pleated chiffon top with spaghetti straps. She was 5’9” or so, on the underside of 30, with straight white-blond hair and a degree of tan that looked egregiously healthy on camera and off. She’d mentioned that her station was grooming her for an anchor position but he hoped she stayed out in the field so he could see her from time to time. No offense to Martha Simmons but next gen eye candy was in the tour rider.

Carrie took out a compact and deftly started reapplying her lipstick, turning toward him to shield herself from the hot wind tugging at the trees and the tent tops. “Got any plans for the not-long-enough Labor Day weekend?” she asked into her compact’s mirror.

He wished that was an invitation to share some Prosecco and a Jacuzzi. “Work, hopefully.”

“Aww. All work and no play? You guys have it so tough.”

“Who?”

“You sketchy independent contractor stringer-types.”

“Oh, you mean everyone who lives hand to mouth outside the lucrative cushy tushy cottony double-ply world of TV?”

“Exactly! All you guys who’d be cleaning pools otherwise. Having to chase news all night it’s amazing you can get up for court in the morning. I’d still be in my PJ’s.” Carrie smacked her lips and beamed at him.

Danny started to stare so he pretended his phone had buzzed with a new message, wondering what *pajamas* entailed for Carrie Voelker. He pictured silk and teeny tiny amounts of it. “Work is better than no work when work equals pay. And I’m not a stringer, I’m gainfully employed. I don’t live in my parents’ basement either.”

“Well you’ve got that going for you.” She put away her gear and checked her phone. “Let me see your drawings. I always see you drawing but never get to see the actual drawings. Let’s see if I could pick them out of a lineup.”

Danny hesitated, then smiled almost bashfully. “Okay, sure.”

Their fingers touched as she took the spiral-bound 9x12 drawing pad. He watched her leaf through his sketches on the heavyweight acid-free white paper, pleased to be the occasional center of her attention. He thought he’d gotten good likenesses of ex-investment banker Nick Mendoza, 54, physically fit but only 5’6”, with a full head of jet-black hair plugs—in his drawings Danny left extra space between the tufts to illustrate it. Mendoza’s tan had faded since he and his girlfriend Charlize Patron were arrested without incident in Cabo San Lucas last year, three months after the body of Dina Mendoza, Nick’s wife of eleven years, was found in the master bathroom tub of their Tarzana mansion with two supposed suicide notes taped to the mirror, one hers, one his.

Dina had drowned in three inches of water from a combination of Absolut and oxymorphone—both bottles were found conveniently within reach and empty. Nick Mendoza’s rambling suicide note—the verbatim contents of either note wouldn’t be revealed to the public until trial but portions had been leaked to the press within hours—allegedly alluded to having discovered his wife’s body, about blaming himself for not realizing how seriously depressed she was, and of being too distraught to carry on without her. There was a vague reference to ending his life with one of his many firearms in a particular area of the desert so for five days military personnel, law enforcement and hundreds of hope-filled volunteers combed a wide swath of the high desert between Edwards Air Force Base and Barstow, but came up with only animal bones and the conclusion that the man’s remains might never be found. It was wide-open, harsh land, and a despondent man so inclined could easily be swallowed up by it.

But when the authenticity of Dina Mendoza’s handwriting on her suicide note was called into question, and the autopsy eventually concluded bruises on her body were consistent with having thrashed and kicked inside the infinity tub, and the cause of death was ultimately determined not to be drowning but mechanical and positional asphyxia, detectives broadened their net and quickly snagged on Charlize Patron.

Charlize was 25 and petite, a waifish 5’2”, and had once been a pretty brown-haired girl from Rancho Cucamonga before she underwent about a thousand cosmetic surgeries to more accurately conform to Nick Mendoza’s fantasy specifications of what his augmented blond girlfriend should look like. Nick had hired Charlize as his personal secretary soon after they met in the Polynesian bar of Trader Vic’s in Beverly Hills and she was promoted to executive secretary within days. Nick gave her a private phone which he paid for and she answered 24/7. Less than a year later Dina Mendoza was dead and Charlize and the supposedly auto-deceased Nick were beginning a permanent vacation

in Mexico. But ignoring his admonitions of secrecy, Charlize texted her friends all about her trip (her defense was already postulating that by calling it a *trip* Charlize had indicated her belief it was a temporary indulgence and that she didn't know anything about Dina Mendoza's death and therefore was almost as much a victim of the crime as Dina Mendoza was). Charlize's friends said as much to the police when investigators came looking for her after Dina was found and Nick was not.

In court Charlize was trying her best to come across as naïve and impressionable while a defense-approved make-under transformed her formerly lascivious beauty into a false dowdiness. She had demonstrated a willingness to make home movies of the pair's athletic sexual escapades, which naturally found their way to the internet and into the prosecution's case (CODA provided links but for legal reasons did not store copies of the videos on their servers). Charlize sat demurely at the defense table with her legs primly crossed and no longer spread, her hands limp in her lap as if she had palsy instead of running them over her skin per Nick's off-camera direction, but to the surprise of everyone she had so far declined to remember certain key details of her lover's whereabouts on the day Dina Mendoza died. If the prosecution didn't turn her their case was open to speculation, and in LA speculation went a long way.

Danny's drawing of Charlize was all lips and tits and reminded him of something his father might have drawn for the summer tourists—it was too much of a caricature. He'd have to redo parts of it when he got home before he uploaded the drawings to his Investment in Murder blog about the Mendoza case.

Looking through his drawings Carrie Voelker's parted lips moved like exotic plumage as she murmured, "We spend so much of life on the seedy side of it, don't we?"

As if she was sharing a secret with him, like what color underwear she was wearing. The tag of Carrie's top was sticking up and Danny wanted to reach out and tuck it back in so he could touch her bare back and the small mole under her right shoulder blade. "Clean only pays the bills for cleaners."

She turned to a page with smaller drawings of the lawyers and presiding judge. "I thought of you this morning when I heard about the fire in Malibu."

Danny was about to remark what a coincidence it was that she was thinking about him this morning because *he* had been thinking about *her* when his phone buzzed for real and the text on his lockscreen stopped him pre-gush.

Get up Corral Cyn ASAP.

The sender's name gave him goosebumps despite the heat and he momentarily forgot Carrie's admission of being practically infatuated with him.

He blinked—she'd said something. "Sorry, what?"

"These are really good," she said again. "You're a real artist."

"I like amenities too much to be an artist."

“Are you going to post these?”

“Yeah.” Reluctantly he forced himself to add, “Speaking of which...”

“Seedy Greek tragedies won’t wait.” She closed the drawing pad and handed it back to him. “See you later Danny.”

“I’ll be watching you tonight Carrie,” he said in his best Vincent Price.

“I can never have too many weirdoes in my life,” she sang over her shoulder. Her heels clacked along the walkway in time to the swaying of her hips as she went to meet her crew at their blue and white news van, parked with the others along Van Nuys Boulevard displaying all the variety of local news—Martha’s blue and white van, Eric’s white and blue van, and wee Carlos’s blue and white van. They were even all the same thinnish European-looking modified Ford.

Despite the urgency he took a moment to savor the miracle of bio-engineering that was Carrie Voelker, like every other right-thinking man in the plaza was getting whiplash doing too, thanking her and her parents and whatever mitochondrial mojo had gone on behind the scenes to create her splendor. Then he walked quickly in the opposite direction, following a walkway between the Valley Municipal Building and a day care to where his pre-owned 2014 Accord which replaced his original Honda was angled into a spot at an expired meter on Sylvan.

He stuffed his tie into the pocket of his court suit jacket and laid it in the back seat, then removed the license plate-size News Media Official Parking Permit and the old cell phone recharging cable from his dashboard, the end of the cable that went into the car’s lighter nicely obscuring the parking permit number. A friend at a TV station had gotten it for him a few years ago and he’d been forging the annual expiration sticker ever since. It would pass a visual inspection but not a computer check and he tried to use it only when necessary.

He replied to the text *On my way* and tapped his phone to bring up freeway traffic conditions.

Corral Canyon was in Malibu, and today Malibu was burning.

CHAPTER 2

He made the westbound Valley crossing on the 101 bathed in eerie golden sunlight which highlighted the vibrantly glowing screens of the hulking five-story tripod media tower squatting over the most gridlocked freeway exchange in the country like a giant invading robot from a planet of merciless advertisers.

There were four such towers around LA, each shaped like a giant bee skep some five stories tall with huge wraparound LED screens. Video played constantly but silently—billboards with audio played on the lower screens closest to the traffic, the sound beamed directly into passing motorists' phones and car stereos from whichever screen was nearest the vehicle, an intrusion which had led to numerous but so far unsuccessful lawsuits. Only an antiquated car stereo or the monthly opt-out fee could alleviate the din, and the waiver didn't even cover all kinds of ads, exempting politicals and whatever else the tower vendor as mass aggregator decided drivers really couldn't do without hearing.

The first tower went up in 2016, hunkering over the 105 and 110 interchange in South LA. In a vain attempt to placate outraged residents—the towers went up so fast because they were mostly empty space apart from the composite skeleton and the screens—the vendor attempted to humanize the behemoth by nicknaming it Anna and giving it a whimsical social media stream. Bella, the second South LA tower located just east of Anna over the junction of the 710 and 105, and the third tower Carla at the massive East LA interchange near downtown, seemed to go up simultaneously, with accompanying PR blitzes, media feeds (Bella was a romantic, Carla somewhat snide being closest to metropolitan downtown), resident protests and lawsuits.

Delma, the fourth and newest tower, went up last year over the 101 and 405 quagmire in the Valley, and was known for issuing practical tips for better living during the precious few hours per day her audience was not locked inside their vehicles within range of her highly-attuned sensors. She and her siblings were still operating despite the class action lawsuits pending against the vendor and the city from thousands of residents incensed by the towers' obnoxious height and glare, fully convinced they'll somehow have the monstrous things uprooted and disassembled and the pieces cast off into a molten lava pit somewhere.

Danny knew better. Never mind the huge upfront investment made on constructing the towers out of super-expensive composite material covered in hand-sized photovoltaic cells. Never mind that the cash- and water-strapped city received nearly half of the ad revenue owing to the structures being erected on city land. Delma alone broadcast to over 400,000 vehicles every day moving at an average speed between leisurely strolling and quadriplegic standstill. At peak times it could take an hour to traverse the junction. Priceless quality eyeball time. The president herself credited the

pioneering towers erected in the Boston-Washington Corridor of the Northeast megalopolis with aiding her historic election bid.

The only thing keeping a fifth LA area tower out of Hollywood was the fault line which the state geologists couldn't get around and which was under increased scrutiny after Inglewood—San Francisco had so far thwarted efforts to build similar towers in the Bay Area, claiming seismic concerns—while the noisiest preservationists were bought off and shut up. The sisters were here to stay.

Whenever traffic stopped Danny scrolled through his phone, reacquainting himself with names and faces of contacts he hadn't had a reason to look at in months, and posting pictures of the smoke plume rising silently over the mountains, a massive column of static grays and whites cleaved by crosswinds at thirty thousand feet as glimpsed between the water conservation billboards with their wide LED screens issuing constant reminders—*Stop making a splash, conserve water! Think outside the sink! Save the flow conserve H2O! Save water—it's not just a drop in the bucket, it's the law!*

He thought again about Carrie Voelker thinking about him this morning and how little she'd been wearing at the time.

Operation Voelker was going swimmingly, spawning a pleasantly giddy flutter in his belly reminiscent of the Saturday morning of Labor Day weekend last year when a wildfire started in the woods off Little Tujunga Canyon, a hairpin road favored by motorcyclists twisting up and over two mountain summits through Angeles National Forest northeast of LA. A bucolic little horse-friendly suburb called Lake View Terrace, where Rodney King was beaten by police in 1991, lay at the south end of the canyon behind the empty basin of the Hansen Dam, and new housing developments sprawled like a fungus through the Antelope Valley on the north. Not much in between unless you were on an ATV or a horse. It was the fourth suspicious fire in Angeles National Forest in as many weeks.

At the initial press conference an LA County Fire Department arson investigator named Mike Cruz declared that the so-called Dillon Fire had been intentionally set, describing “unnatural burn vectors” resulting from the use of a “flame-propelling device.” A reporter asked him if he'd ever seen anything like that before. Cruz said he had, but moved on to a question from another reporter who wasn't on the same page who asked something Cruz could defer to another official to answer. The press conference ended without Cruz saying another word. He hadn't said anything officially about it to anyone since, referring all questions to the fire department public information officers.

At the time Danny was going through a dry spell of noteworthy offenses and offenders and was slumming it through the churn of short distresses, homicides and almostcides—almost homicides—predictable by their economic location around the city. He was itching for something deep to jump into so he made his way to the Dillon Fire's incident command post which was organized in a gravel

turnout less than a mile from the fire's point of origin and proceeded to gather hours of interviews with anyone at the scene who'd talk to him—residents, firefighters, victims, battalion chiefs, arson investigators like Mark Pavelko from the U.S. Forest Service who was genial and forthcoming and turned into a terrific source. Everyone but the reticent Mike Cruz who automatically deflected reporters to fire department public information officers ensuring everyone got the same thing unless they had a source inside the investigation.

Danny scoured previously published sources—articles, blogs, official investigative reports, news releases and Forest Service incident reports, hundreds of photos and videos. The specter of arson was raised repeatedly as it often was during California's ever-lengthening fire season, stretching across the calendar year like a snake trying to catch its own tail, fueled by the new normal of mega-drought. But drilling down using Cruz's keywords he was able to isolate seven wildfires in just the previous seven weeks with references to unusual scorch marks or burn patterns.

He replaced the detailed Los Angeles and vicinity map pinned to a wall in his bedroom with color maps of four parched Southern California counties and plotted the eight wildfires on them with red plastic thumb tacks, backtracking from the Dillon Fire through the epic conflagration called the Box Fire which had erupted on Wednesday August 22 in Angeles National Forest, a fire that would ultimately take six weeks and some 150,000 acres of national forest to wrestle into containment, back to the inauspicious spark that started the firestorm, a smoldering grassy mound of earth surrounded by the suburbs of Thousand Oaks in Ventura County which burned less than an acre on Saturday July 14 and took only fifteen minutes to contain and extinguish. The so-called Hillcrest Fire was the first confirmed wildfire with the telltale scorch marks, which made it significant in both location and catalyst, though no one had been able to develop anything significant from it.

A firefighter who'd been among the first at the scene of the Dillon Fire told him that he personally saw a polystyrene foam drinking cup standing unscathed atop a charred trash can behind the fire line. Danny was split over whether it was meaningful or one of those casual coincidences that reminds you that Mother Nature is the ultimate prankster. When he asked Mark Pavelko about the cup the Forest Service agent blamed an inmate crew for littering, but the more he downplayed the significance of the cup the deeper Danny's teeth sank into the soft underbelly of its significance—until he became convinced the person who left the cup was the person who burned everything around it. And a drinking cup might have DNA on it.

Finally Pavelko asked him not to post anything about the goddamned cup.

Danny balked in graphic, anatomically-challenging phrases, citing everything from the US constitution to *Roe v. Wade*.

Pavelko offered unparalleled access in exchange for his concession.

Danny conceded.

Red Flag, his definitive blog about the wildfires, was born.

First he created the *de rigueur* sobriquet. Authorities may have been reluctant to even acknowledge a single suspect was behind the wildfires, but with four blazes back to back in Angeles National Forest and the overall westward creep toward greater Los Angeles, in a post on September 7 Danny christened the suspect the Angeles Arsonist. The nickname stuck like sticky tree sap. Pavelko was ambivalent about the moniker; he told Danny that they called him the Bug within the task force, with as much derision as two meager syllables could allow. Bug, short for Firebug. Danny didn't like *firebug* because it inferred a helplessness in the face of one's nature or urges, and while he'd met a few such helpless wretches over the years they paled in comparison to the sheer number of offenders who were just smart enough to willingly and consistently make bad choices.

The federal task force—technically called a fusion center in their press releases—was a direct result of Danny's public connection of the prolific spate of wildfires. Investigators and special agents were drawn from multiple agencies—the US Forest Service, Cal Fire, police and fire investigators from LA, Ventura, San Bernardino and Kern counties, the Office of the State Fire Marshal, Office of Emergency Services, FBI, ATF. On and on the acronyms went. Exact figures weren't disclosed but there were estimated to be between twenty and thirty investigators dedicated to identifying and capturing the so-called Angeles Arsonist.

But eight more wildfires burned into November. Red Flag's readership grew exponentially as the number of devastated acres soared. The online map looked great and was interactive with photos and video and stats and links to related interviews. The last confirmed fire was the sixteenth in just four months, the Los Liones Fire in Pacific Palisades behind the famed Getty Villa museum, which burned close to 60 acres on Saturday November 3. There was no damage to the museum but nearby neighborhoods and a church were evacuated. Local news broadcast dramatic footage of stranded hikers being airlifted off the trail below Paseo Miramar with the wall of advancing smoke behind them.

After that fire the Angeles Arsonist retreated into hibernation as winter weather balmied the scorched earth he'd left behind. Crews mopped up and waited. Families grieved the loss of houses, the decimation of land. A firefighter's family mourned a loss much greater. Investigators solicited tips and chased leads. Danny did too, interviewing anyone he could find with a connection to the fires and adding to the maps in his bedroom, trying to flesh out the phantom by the few facts he'd left behind.

The Angeles Arsonist had averaged a major fire a week from July 14 to November 3, an unprecedented pace of destruction. Eleven fires had been set on Saturdays, five on Wednesdays. The schedule had to be indirect evidence of whatever passed as normal life confining the guy—a job, a family, things that forced him to at least partially conform to society's shape like tough dough

molded in a pan. With few exceptions he seemed fond of a general geographical profile investigators had come to rely on—perhaps, Danny suggested in a post about the eleventh fire, the devastating Chalk Fire on September 29, *too* heavily. It was true most of the wildfires were started off rural roads, often in a turnout or bend at the opening of a canyon. Since fire spreads faster uphill than down the steep terrain offered his fires a head start. It was agreed that the suspect was a white male but from there the profiling fell apart. Some armchair geniuses believed he was employed, others that he was unemployable. He was married. He was divorced, and bitterly. To some he was in his early twenties, to others over forty.

Other than his race the only point of agreement was on the device—a military-grade flamethrower, possibly surplus, possibly homemade. A devastating weapon in the hands of an arsonist wandering far and wide across the extra-dry late summer mountains around Los Angeles. Today's fire in Malibu accompanied by Mark Pavelko's text—*Get up Corral Cyn ASAP*—begged the question Danny and everyone else had been waiting to ask since last November:

Is the Angeles Arsonist coming back?

As he neared Malibu the giant plume began to move, bubbling and rolling upward on itself, dark smoke crowned by light across craggy mountain tops. The Accord's air conditioning cooled the smoke smell seeping into the cabin through the vents as Danny followed Malibu Canyon down to Pacific Coast Highway.

In some ways he had anticipated Pavelko's text. Yesterday the National Weather Service issued a Red Flag Warning for the region, with forecasters predicting temperatures in the upper 90s, winds of 20 to 40 miles per hour with local gusts up to 60, and a relative humidity of only 10%. By noon Santa Ana conditions were being reported in the Antelope and Santa Clarita Valleys with sustained northwesterly winds at 30 miles an hour. Firefighters were on standby across the county but Malibu was the first to explode.

Traffic slowed well before Pepperdine University even came into view. Danny inched around the scenic private campus onto the coastal highway where red, lemon and white fire engines from companies all over the southern half of the state were lined up on the shoulder. Adding insult to injury during the emergency a crane truck was blocking a lane, positioned to hoist up a car that had left the road and was visible in the tree tops of the property below the embankment. Eastbound traffic was compressed into one lane and westbound drivers were enticed to slow down and stare.

At the intersection of PCH and Corral Canyon Danny encountered his first organized resistance—a sheriff's roadblock on the corner where the old BeauRivage restaurant used to be. He'd been there on a date just a few days before it burned down in June 2012 from an electrical short

in the attic. The relationship hadn't gone anywhere either but it had sure looked promising on that wine-drenched night by the sea.

One of the uniformed deputies at the roadblock examined his license, laminated media pass and CODA ID. Paused about fifty times to listen to the radio clipped to his tan-colored shirt. Danny eyed the flat body cam clipped to the cop's uniform and tried not to fidget and sure as shit didn't play any reggae.

"Go as far as the RV park," the cop finally said to him.

"And then what?"

The cop stopped to listen to his radio for about twenty minutes. "And then stop," he said after so long that Danny had almost forgotten what he'd asked.

"What's happening at the RV park?" he asked.

"Nothing, which is why you're going there. Or you can turn your vehicle around and leave the area."

The cop held Danny's credentials daintily by two fingers as if he might release them to the whim of the Santa Ana wind. Danny poured on the obsequiousness and answered, "Yes sir. Thank you. I appreciate it."

He took his things back greedily and passed over the RV park in the large switchback, cruising nice and slow until he reached the entrance. He parked beside three or four other cars with single occupants and probably authentic media passes slanted on their dashboards. Journalists too sedentary or obedient to do anything but wait until the story came to them gift-wrapped. No cops here though, they were too busy to babysit reporters.

Danny kept his engine running.

After five minutes that felt like five years of indentured servitude under a sadistic feudal lord a fire truck finally came lumbering up the road, screening him from view at the roadblock. He stepped on the gas and willed the underpowered Honda to embrace its inner funny car and give him high octane G's to press him back into his fabric seat. The motor whined agonizingly through the twisty ascent up the mountain as he checked the rearview mirror for a pursuing set of police lights that never came.

He aimed his ultra-compact Sony camcorder out the window. Nobody was evacuating yet from El Nido, a tiny, dense cluster of houses with ocean views clinging to the western side of the ridge, but it was a different story further up Corral Canyon at Malibu Bowl, a community of about a hundred houses, some on their tiptoes at three stories to peer over one another and the top of the mountain ridge at the ocean. The line of fleeing vehicles packed like refugees, some towing horse trailers, eventually forced Danny to squeeze into a vacated space on the side of the road behind a news van whose crew was sheltering inside from the heat and wind.

He texted Pavelko that he'd arrived and arranged the media parking permit and cell phone charger on his dash, then shouldered his messenger bag, grimacing at the added weight of his laptop which he couldn't leave behind to melt in his car, and doffed his official CODA baseball cap. CODA's body outline logo was emblazoned on all of their merchandise—sales from their popular online gift store helped subsidize the endeavor given the vagaries of online ad revenue.

He walked near the houses to avoid traffic; the road was too narrow for sidewalks. The wind howled up the canyon, blasting sand and grit into his nose and mouth. Within a minute his shirt was soaked through with sweat. After ten more his phone buzzed and he stopped beside an official-looking white Toyota pickup parked in the driveway of a presumably empty home, with a lightbar and a red stripe down the side like the Cal Fire supervisors' trucks which were common sights at wildfires. Danny turned his back to the wind and shaded the display with his hand so he could read it in the hostile sunlight. It was a text from Pavelko saying he was coming down to get him.

"Oh sweet Jesus." Danny gratefully sat down on the curb and drank half a bottle of water with loud frog-like gulps. A long black Mercedes sedan rolled past with two white-haired passengers sitting rigidly in front. The back seat was filled with suitcases and duffel bags full of the five P's of evacuation—pets, papers, prescriptions, pictures, PC's—in the form of portable hard drives. Anything you could carry that was irreplaceable should your house and all the rest of your belongings be about to cease to exist. Wildfire evened the economic playing field—the only difference between the rich and the rest was how quickly and comfortably they could recover. Otherwise fire was an equal-opportunity destroyer.

He was blogging that thought from his phone when he looked up and saw someone sitting at the wheel of the pickup, watching him. "Hey."

"Hey yourself," the driver said.

Danny tapped his phone to record video and stood up. "Mind if I ask you a few questions?"

"You a reporter?"

"Yeah." He crouched by the open passenger window and presented his ID with his elbows on the door to keep his phone level. "Danny Kasho, CODA.com. What's your name?"

"Tillson." He was a big guy with a prominent ridge over his eyes and a thick, flat nose that made his nostrils flare. A double chin pressed against goggles looped around his neck. He wore his dark hair long in back over the collar of a standard yellow wildland firefighting jacket. A detailed topographical map was spread across the dashboard. Food wrappers and soda bottles had collected in the passenger footwell. His jacket and spruce green Nomex brush pants looked practically new; evidently he hadn't been tapped for duty yet.

Danny was satisfied with the imaging on his phone. "You working the fire?"

“I’m a volunteer firefighter. They need all the help they can get up there.” Tillson’s voice was high-pitched and boyish, as if his vocal cords hadn’t matured along with his body.

“It looks pretty bad.”

“Active perimeter of thirty miles. Fifteen hundred firefighters. Zero percent containment. It’s bad alright.”

“You been up there yet?”

“Course I have. What TV show do you work for?”

“It’s online, CODA.com. What’s your first name?”

Tillson hesitated. Opened his mouth, then snapped it closed with a toothy click.

“For your permission to quote you,” Danny explained.

“Carl.”

“What do you do when you’re not volunteer firefighting, Carl?”

“Wait for the next season like everyone else.”

“Got any thoughts on how it started?”

“Looks deliberate to me. Know why?”

A red LA County Fire Department Ford Ranger squealed to a stop and honked. Mark Pavelko beckoned through the open window.

Danny tapped his phone. “Thanks for your time, Carl. Good luck.” He grabbed his messenger bag and hurried over between passing fire engines and evacuees.

Mark Pavelko’s dark hair curled up from under a black and orange San Francisco 49ers cap. In the grating Chicago accent Danny remembered he said, “Looks like somebody’s luau got a little out of hand. Wanna go get some?”

They shook hands through the window. “Love me a good luau.” Danny walked around the front and got in, grateful for the air conditioning and shade.

Pavelko executed a tight three-point turn while holding his badge out of his window to stop traffic and they headed up the winding ridge road toward the fire.

CHAPTER 3

US Forest Service Special Agent Mark Pavelko drove with his right hand and worried his ear lobe with his left as they ascended the uppermost cutbacks of Corral Canyon. He wore a gold wedding ring and a silver watch on the inside of his left wrist. Ray-Ban aviator sunglasses were looped around his neck on a neoprene strap and rested against the chest of his sea green Forest Service polo shirt which was spotted with dark islands of sweat.

A two-way radio propped in the console had someone else's name taped to the back of it and squawked with information relayed from around the firefight. Communication was always a challenge at major events like this and could—in crucial lapses—be almost as dangerous as the fire itself. Hand crews, engine crews, air crews, support crews and supervisors all fought for space on the crowded radio channels for everything from bulldozers to bathrooms.

“What do you say Danny?” Pavelko said. “That’s what you wear to a luau? The world is round Mr. Shiny Shoes, don’t be such a square.”

“I was in court, I can’t be looking like I joined your men’s group out in the woods for bear hugs and brewskies.”

“Finally getting those traffic tickets cleared up?”

“I was trying to get out of jury duty.”

“It’s our civic obligation. This is the land of milk and honey and jury duty, you frigging freeloader.”

The road’s usual sweeping views were blocked by the dense smoke billowing out of the canyon. Danny videoed a red Air Crane helicopter chugging past at low altitude, a gangly aircraft that looked like a gigantic stick insect, modified for wildland firefighting with the addition of a hose dangling umbilically from a water tank in its belly. He recalled that it was leased from a company in Oregon and cost something like \$8000 an hour to operate.

He said, “Speaking of milk and honey you look like you’re eating well.”

Pavelko patted his belly jutting over the lap belt but didn’t smile. “It’s not the hotel food, I promise you that.”

“Looks like you got yourself a pretty good luau going here today.”

“Hope you brought your appetite. You’re not a frigging vegetarian are you?”

“Strictly omnivorous. Thanks for calling me. I almost couldn’t get up here.”

“You took long enough.”

“I was getting my shoes buffed.”

“They locked it down a couple hours ago—some of your contemporaries beat you here before they did.”

“So drive faster. This isn’t your car, who cares? Go all TJ Hooker with it.”

“Only if you climb out on the hood. LA County has nicer trucks than the Service, this is a pleasure to drive. Like a Sunday out with the kids.”

“Speaking of which how’s your family?”

Pavelko tugged his earlobe. “My family? My family is perfect. Everything’s perfect. My girls are gorgeous. Emma and Addison. They’re eight now. I’m trying to watch my mouth.”

“I noticed.”

“Did you? At least it’s a habit now. Almost anyway. Their mother wants me to so, you know. I’m working on it. Like I don’t have enough frigging challenges in my life. I’m taking them back to Chicago.”

“To visit your old stomping grounds?”

“For good, I think.”

“Really? Got homesick?”

“Something like that. Time for a change.”

“Do you have to spend a lot of time away from them?”

“Too much. That’s going to end real soon.”

They stopped at another roadblock and parked on the dirt shoulder behind a red heavy-duty Type III wildland fire engine, its raised chassis and four wheel drive optimized for rough terrain.

“Good thing you wore your shiniest shoes,” Pavelko said, “we’re walking from here. Man, you are a disaster on the road. I thought you were a commando journalist, ready for anything.”

“Anything except a camping trip. I didn’t bring any s’mores either.”

“You didn’t see the smoke this morning?”

“I didn’t want to assume.”

“You didn’t want to get your hopes up you mean. Keep boots in the car, bud.”

“Yes sir.”

“That goes for s’mores too. Love those frigging things.”

Hot minutes passed trudging under the midday sun into the violent death of a landscape. Danny took pictures and video as Pavelko listened to his radio, huffing and puffing under his extra weight. Grit was sandblasted into their faces and Danny wished he’d brought his court tie to cover his nose and mouth like a metropolitan Tuareg.

Firefighters in yellow jackets and overpants, hardhats and equipment web belts carried chainsaws, shovels, and axe-like tools called pulaskis at shoulder arms like rifles as they tramped past the incident command post which was arrayed between Corral Canyon and a dirt fire road rising on

the edge of a ridge. A group of stocky red four wheel drive fire engines and a big LA County Fire Department incident command truck were parked amidst official vehicles, ambulances, and the personal vehicles of battalion chiefs and supervisors who'd rushed to the scene from their homes early this morning. Speakers at the ICP broadcast the chaotic traffic clogging the radio channels. Portable showers and a mobile kitchen unit with long plastic dining tables were already set up in this makeshift, temporary village for the firefighters. Danny counted six local TV news vans. A pair of Wide Load tractor trailers, empty of the dozers they'd transported which were out clearing fire lines, were parked near one of the big white coroner's trucks he'd seen before at major events when there were multiple fatalities.

He took pictures of it and looked at Pavelko. His question was drowned out by a yellow and white Firehawk helicopter thundering by on its way to do a water drop. "Was somebody caught in the fire?" he repeated, loudly.

Pavelko nodded toward a group of reporters gathered for a briefing with an LA County Fire Department PIO in front of the incident command truck. "I'll be back in a minute."

While Danny was grateful that Pavelko had helped him get this far, he didn't think a public information officer briefing really warranted *Get up Corral Cyn ASAP*. This merely put him on par with his contemporaries. Sure that was something, he thought as he hurried over to join the briefing, but it wasn't *ASAP*, one of his most reviled acronyms. Right up there with LOL and ICYMI, or prefacing a tragic headline with SO SAD.

A detailed topographical map of the area was taped to one of the two slide-outs protruding from the side of the command truck, built on a 40-foot Freightliner chassis with room for six inside. Danny worked his way around cameramen and a guy holding a boom mic, stepped around flats of bottled water and leaned his Sony camcorder in over the shoulder of a shorter reporter, half-thinking it was wee Carlos Esquivel but knowing the only way he could have beaten him here was with a jet pack. The short guy turned to see who the encroacher was and Danny flinched—it wasn't a guy at all.

It was Ursula Ruda.

He should have recognized the khaki safari vest with its many pockets bulging on her petite frame. She wore rectangular glasses with red clip-on lenses that tinted her brown eyes black and a nylon Tilley hat that shaded her shoulder-length auburn hair which she wore straight over her ears to hide the flesh-colored hearing aid nestled in her left one. Ursula was the only notable writer at Crime Time, which was the only notable local competition to CODA. Danny called it Dime Time because generally speaking their reporting wasn't worth one—Ursula Ruda being the notable exception.

He moved a few inches to the side. "Hey there."

"Nice shoes," she said.

“We missed you in Van Nuys this morning. Didn’t you get the invite?” He noted the same old DayGlo charity bracelet whose fad had come and gone around her wrist.

“No deal, no point”.

Danny recalled the immaculate splendidness of Carrie Voelker’s finest asset. “I beg to differ.”

“Go beg somewhere else.”

“I will, as soon as I’m done here.”

“Why wait?” Ursula pushed her little black Sony digital recorder toward the PIO as the fire captain updated the fire stats, speaking loudly and clearly for the mics held in front of him.

The Backbone Fire had broken out around eleven o’clock last night. In its first hour it had consumed approximately 2200 acres, or about 37 acres per minute. Winds from the north-northeast blowing consistently at 30 to 40 miles per hour with gusts approaching 70 were contributing to the fire’s rate of spread. Flame lengths of 200 feet had been seen as the fire crested the ridge on the other side of the canyon. The huge convection column was spiraling some six miles into the sky. Storms of embers and flaming brands were observed spotting as far as a mile in advance of the fire. Even utilizing what natural boundaries they could incident commanders weren’t close to getting a box around the fire. Some were predicting it would go all the way to the beach like previous bad fires in the area had. One crew had already been overrun but survived uninjured. Nothing so far was slowing the fire’s advance toward the exclusive ranch homes around Malibu Lake where engines and crews were building up for a defensive fight.

Danny thought Backbone was a good name. He blogged the name and figures from his phone as other reporters asked routine clarifying questions he didn’t need. Ursula was listening intently as if it was the first time she’d ever heard them.

Pavelko rejoined him without the borrowed radio. “Come on.”

“Stay off my story,” Danny said to Ursula.

“Find one and I will,” she replied.

He felt her eyes on his back as he followed Pavelko toward the dirt fire road—when Ursula Ruda stared at you she could resemble an owl. A troublesomely sexy little owl. Made you nervous and turned on at the same time.

He and Ursula had both had pieces competing for best online investigative series at the prestigious LA Press Club SoCal Journalism Awards Gala at the swanky Biltmore hotel downtown in June. They knew each other distantly from working around town but had seldom talked. Just noticed each other. Ursula had come to the awards gala dressed as her hot doppelganger, her hair cropped tight like a flapper’s, wearing a little black dress that was fitting a form nobody knew she had. They were already drunk when they hooked up in a handicapped stall of a bathroom while an honorary award was being presented a few minutes before their category.

Danny's winning plaque rested on the floor against the side of his desk at home and Ursula hadn't spoken to him since. Normally that wouldn't bother him except he couldn't stop being bothered by it. Especially when he saw her.

That was the Ursula Issue.

"You hear some firefighters were overrun?" he asked when he caught up to Pavelko.

"Lucky for them they got their shelters deployed in time. Those things are rated for twelve hundred degrees but at five hundred the glue holding them together starts to break down. If the fire burns over you quick enough you'll survive. If it slows down or intensifies, you won't. Either way if you've gotta get into one something has gone seriously frigging wrong. You know what LCES is?"

"Lookouts, communications, escape routes and safety zones. Standard safety protocol."

"Words to live by. This fire's a real bad bitch right now."

"Is it like the others?"

"Answer's a definite maybe."

"Well that's quotable."

"Hey, who else is giving you a lift into the definite maybe? Did I cut in line?"

Adding to the challenge for investigators was identifying genuine Angeles Arsonist fires from other suspicious blazes which were often quickly and erroneously attributed to the same suspect, bogging investigators down in fallen power lines and careless campers and at least one copycat arsonist out in Riverside. No one was eager to jump to conclusions with this much at stake.

The shell of a car burned bone-white slumped a hundred feet up the fire road. Danny zoomed in with his camera and got a shot of the plate. A brown sign for Backbone Trail, a sixty-mile hiking trail through the Santa Monica mountains, was scorched but still upright; the gate had been swung open and locked for emergency vehicle access.

"911 call came in last night about 11:30," Pavelko panted as they hiked up the dirt motorway, both of them wincing into the wind-blown dust and sand. "First responders arrived ten minutes later to an uncontrolled blaze and that car burning behind the fire line."

Danny's feet were killing him. It felt like he was walking on ball bearings. He could feel every single loose stone through the soles of his court shoes. First fire of the season and he was in his Cole Haan wingtips instead of his Timberland hikers. Unbelievable.

"Smell that?" Pavelko asked.

He had to pause to suck air in through his nose, he was breathing too hard to use it. "Gasoline?"

"The nose knows."

"So much for the luau."

The fire road was dug into the side of the hill over steep drops into dense thickets of shrubs and trees which had already been reduced to wasteland. Blackened stumps of manzanita and sage clawed like fingers out of a decimated terrain broken by occasional green sprigs which had somehow survived the onslaught. Smooth rocks jutted some thirty feet out of the top of the ridge. The mesmerizing ribbon of flame at the bottom of the canyon was barely a mile away.

An inmate hand crew, a dozen men of a variety of ages and ethnicities in distinctive orange gear, stood off by themselves with a Cal Fire captain in yellow. The con crews went through the same basic training as the professional Type 1 crews, which included the Hotshots who sometimes flared tragically into the public eye. But there were no guards, and the inmates carried the same hand tools as the professional firefighters that could be brandished like weapons in the hands of rebellious color-coordinated serfs. They were a self-policing, self-reliant group of outcasts that only needed enough hard work and empathetic authority figures to break their resistance to falling into line, an obvious model for non-violent prisoner rehabilitation staring the state and taxpayers in the face. But out here the cons knew their place—if there was a line or a priority the professional firefighters came first.

Pavelko nodded to a steely-faced county fire captain observing firefighters and sheriff's deputies who were erecting a tent over an unnatural splash of color tangled in scorched shrubs.

Danny's excitement choked in his throat like a half-chewed piece of meat.

Singed red fabric clung to a charred, discolored torso enmeshed in burnt tree limbs like a spider clutching a grotesque, partially-cremated prize. Bare arms were bent skyward with fists clenched like the desiccated remains of a boxer belatedly daring life to fight before it left. Most of the visible skin had oxidized into blotchy, brittle black tissue that looked like tree bark. Teeth leered in a horrid smile out of a face stripped of its humanizing features.

Danny took pictures automatically, trusting his camera to compensate for his trembling hands and fighting the impulse to gag. He instinctively recognized the humanoid shape of the thing—the midsection covered by apparently non-flammable red shorts, the purple Ugg boots melted around the stumps of feet. Only the most cosmetic elements of life remained. Who was this person? he asked himself to keep his brain from seizing up like an engine that had run out of oil. What were the steps they'd taken that led them to this mockery of life, these base human secrets of vulgar muscle and fat exposed to strangers? They had been burned so thoroughly it was as if someone had tried to smite the cosmic energy of life itself.

Someone.

"You all right?" The muscles worked in Pavelko's jaw.

"Yeah." Danny felt suddenly lightheaded. He cleared his throat and said with more conviction, "Yes."

“Suppose I should have warned you.”

“I’m fine. Who is it?”

“We don’t know yet. Come on, watch your step.” Pavelko led them up a grassy fissure that served as a natural path between the rocks and was strewn with litter, plastic wrappers, smashed green and brown beer bottles. “Interesting place to start a fire, eh Danny? Surrounded by all these frigging rocks.”

Danny traced carvings hewn into the walls with his fingers, primitive shapes and initials like stone age graffiti etched as if into the bark of a petrified tree. He had no idea this place was here, this remote, rugged tiara over Malibu’s expensive dress. The rocks tapered near the end, briefly shading them before they came out onto a rocky plateau affording a breathtaking panorama of the mountains and the wildfire down below. A fleet of drones deployed to survey the fire, the big eight-rotor octocopters government agencies preferred for law enforcement and general surveillance, buzzed autonomously around the smoke which was so close it looked like you could reach out and cup some in your hand like dry ice. The drones were part of the Fuego—Fire Urgency Estimator in Geosynchronous Orbit—alert system which combined drones, manned aircraft and infrared imagery from a dedicated satellite to detect fires in the western US within three minutes of their ignition.

A tall man in navy blue cargo pants and a yellow Nomex work shirt with the sleeves rolled up stood on the plateau with his back to them, surveying the inferno with his hands clasped behind his back.

Danny shaded his eyes. Across from them rose another outcropping of rocks not as high as the one they stood on. Several investigators and coroner’s technicians were gathered around the chest-high entrance to a cave. A small campfire ring had been carved out of the ground, a shallow stone bowl filled with ashes and chunks of burned wood. A blue and white cooler was upended nearby with a smattering of plastic cups. The last reach of sunlight fell upon a spill of gray limbs on the rock floor just inside the mouth of the cave.

They were surrounded by corpses. Wholesale slaughter had happened here. A massacre—and Danny decided on the spot to use that in the title of his Red Flag update, which was going to be epic. *The Backbone Fire. Massacre in Malibu.*

Below the outcropping a woman with a ponytail and a dark blue ATF t-shirt was bent over, photographing something on the ground marked by a little yellow flag. An impression in the dirt maybe. A ruler was laid on the ground beside it for reference.

Pavelko touched his elbow and he lowered his camera.

“Danny I believe you know Captain Mike Cruz. Mike this is Danny Kasho, the reporter we talked about. The one who christened our Bug for us.”

Cruz turned around slowly, as if stirred by a distant noise. He was in his mid-50s, an imposing man a couple inches taller than Danny, who at six feet was substantially less than Cruz's heavysset frame. Cruz wore his polarized wraparound sunglasses up on his sun-reddened head which was beaded with sweat. His moustache had so far retained the flinty hue which had fled his hair, which he wore longish and combed-back like a Western movie actor. His gray eyes cast a disdainful look at the body outline logo on Danny's hat, the press lanyard hanging around his neck, his dusty sweat-soaked suit clothes and not so shiny shoes.

"Good to see you again sir," Danny said and gulped the rest of his water.

Cruz stared blankly at him, then at Pavelko. "What's this all about, Mark?"

Pavelko drank from his canteen. "We agreed we're going to need the public's help. Mike—meet the public."

"Here, Mark?"

"Right here, Mike."

Cruz started to say something, then stopped and frowned as if Pavelko had just remarked a non sequitur such as the commuter train schedules in India.

"We agreed he's reading his own clippings," Pavelko said, "which means he's following Danny's blog like everyone else is. Scrolling through the comments, seeing what people are saying about him. Maybe he's even posting comments himself."

Danny's fingertips tingled. So the Backbone Fire *was* connected to the others. The Angeles Arsonist *was* back. He'd often wondered if the suspect was reading Red Flag but it never occurred to him that he might be an active member of the posting community too. He licked his lips. "How many victims are there?"

Pavelko wiped the sweat from his eyes. "Three females and one male in the cave. Looks like they died from smoke inhalation but obviously we don't know yet. Plus the burned body down on the motorway."

Danny said to Cruz, "An informed and vigilant public can only help. He *is* one of us. Somebody knows him. Somebody's his neighbor."

"Your hope for a headline isn't a good enough reason," Cruz said calmly, like a teacher rehashing the same arguments for a new class of dumbshits.

"We've got five good reasons right here," Pavelko said. "All in various shades of dead. Enough is enough—we need a different approach. This is what we talked about." He tipped his chin at Danny. "This is who he is."

"This isn't a media ride-along, Mark."

“We said we want to take away this guy’s hiding places. Danny here’s got a nice bright spotlight he can shine for us. We let his blog take point. We give him some stuff, maybe we can draw him out. I think the Bug’s itching to talk to somebody. To brag.”

“So you keep saying.”

Pavelko took his cap off and scratched his head. There was an ugly purplish-yellow bruise on his forehead. “Well Mike, you of all people should know how it feels to be the lone voice in the wilderness.”

Cruz curled his lip and glared at Danny. “I don’t recall agreeing to *give* anybody anything.”

“So you’d rather wait for the next one?” Danny asked. “And the one after that, and the one after that?”

“Are we satisfied with point of origin?” Pavelko asked, redirecting the conversation.

Cruz waited an admonishing beat before answering. “The first one’s outside the cave entrance. You can see the scorching on the rock. Flames ignited the shrubs, smoke filled the cave and killed the four victims. Second one’s by the edge. Scorch marks on the ground, spotting several feet away which started the fire on its path around the west side of the rocks. Third is the single victim—he or she was sprayed with flammable liquid and either jumped or fell into the foliage, which ignited the fire that climbed the ridge on the east side. Both fires combined on the north side of the rocks and started down into the canyon.”

“How popular is this place?” Pavelko asked.

“Students, local surfers, they all know about this place. We’ve had to put out fires here before but nothing like this. This fire should not have been that intense that fast, even under these conditions. Those kids should have been able to escape. He waited outside the cave to see if any of them tried. One did and was set on fire.”

Cruz’s detailed, dispassionate delivery was almost unnerving. Danny hoped the wind noise wasn’t interfering with his recording.

Cruz glanced at him, hesitating a beat before adding, “He’s back Mark.”

Pavelko chewed his lip. “Agreed. And he just hit the big leagues in a major frigging way.”

Danny flushed with excitement—Red Flag had just hit the big leagues too.

“So what is he going to do for us?” Cruz jerked a thumb at Danny. “What do you propose *you* give him, Mark?”

It was the first hint of a breach, the first indication that Cruz might acquiesce, with just enough prodding, just the right kind of incentive. Danny’s pulse was racing from something other than the hike in. Nobody else was this close. He was inside.

Pavelko was obviously prepared for the question. “Like we discussed, we say that we know how he made the flamethrower. We know how he’s starting the fires, we know why, we’re tracing parts

and suppliers. More than that—we know *him*. We know he’s older, professional, he’s a firefighter—”

“He’s a fanboy not a professional,” Cruz objected tiredly. This was a point they’d obviously gone over many times already. “He hasn’t been hired by any fire department anywhere. He might work for a tangential agency but he’s no firefighter. And he’s still young.”

“Playing Bob the Builder with a flamethrower isn’t a young man’s game, Mike.”

“So he’s matured past the point of matches. He’s still acting out of an anger he’s too immature to control.”

“Since when is age synonymous with control? He’s in control as much as he wants to be. Especially after chilling out for nine months—”

“Ten months,” Danny said. “November third was the last one.”

“Then I’d say he’s got more than enough control,” Pavelko continued. “And he’s hiding in plain sight. Somewhere.”

Cruz clucked his tongue. “This isn’t getting us anywhere. This isn’t investigative, and *this* isn’t the place or the time.” He aimed a thick finger at Danny. A class ring glittered on his fist. “Tell me you understand Mr. Pavelko’s murky arrangement since I myself do not.”

“Perfectly,” Danny replied. “According to you two the Angeles Arsonist could be anybody. Thanks, that’s really Pulitzer material. Does everyone on the task force think he’s someone totally different? And what parts and suppliers have you actually tracked down?”

Pavelko coughed into his hand.

Cruz’s eyes narrowed. “Mister...?”

“Danny Kasho, CODA.com.”

“If you’ll excuse us, we have work to do here.”

“Thanks for the reminder Mike,” Pavelko said as Cruz turned back to face the smoke. “C’mon Danny.”

They went back down between the rock walls to the fire road. The wind had shifted and brought with it the awful reek of a body’s worth of burned skin and organs. Danny opened a new water bottle, confident Ursula and everyone else hadn’t been able to get past the command center. This was epic hugeness.

“You got some gems here today,” Pavelko said to him, as if reading his mind like a ticker tape.

“I got a bunch of conflicted investigators, that’s what I got.”

“Sure, but don’t write that.”

“Seriously—is there no consensus on the task force? Is there no fusion? You guys aren’t anywhere with this?”

“According to Red Flag you’d know if we were.”

“I pride myself on my sources. What was the ATF agent photographing on the ground? Boot prints?”

“Boot prints? What boot prints? I’m talking about you being close enough that the ground’s still warm under your shiny shoes.”

“I appreciate that.”

“And I appreciate your discretion.” He coughed again. “And I’d appreciate seeing what you’re going to post about this. About what we talked about up there.”

This was the price of Pavelko’s deal—an oversight committee. “Okay,” Danny said.

“Okay what?”

“I’ll send it to you before I post it.”

“I appreciate that. Don’t say anything about any boot prints for me.”

“What boot prints?”

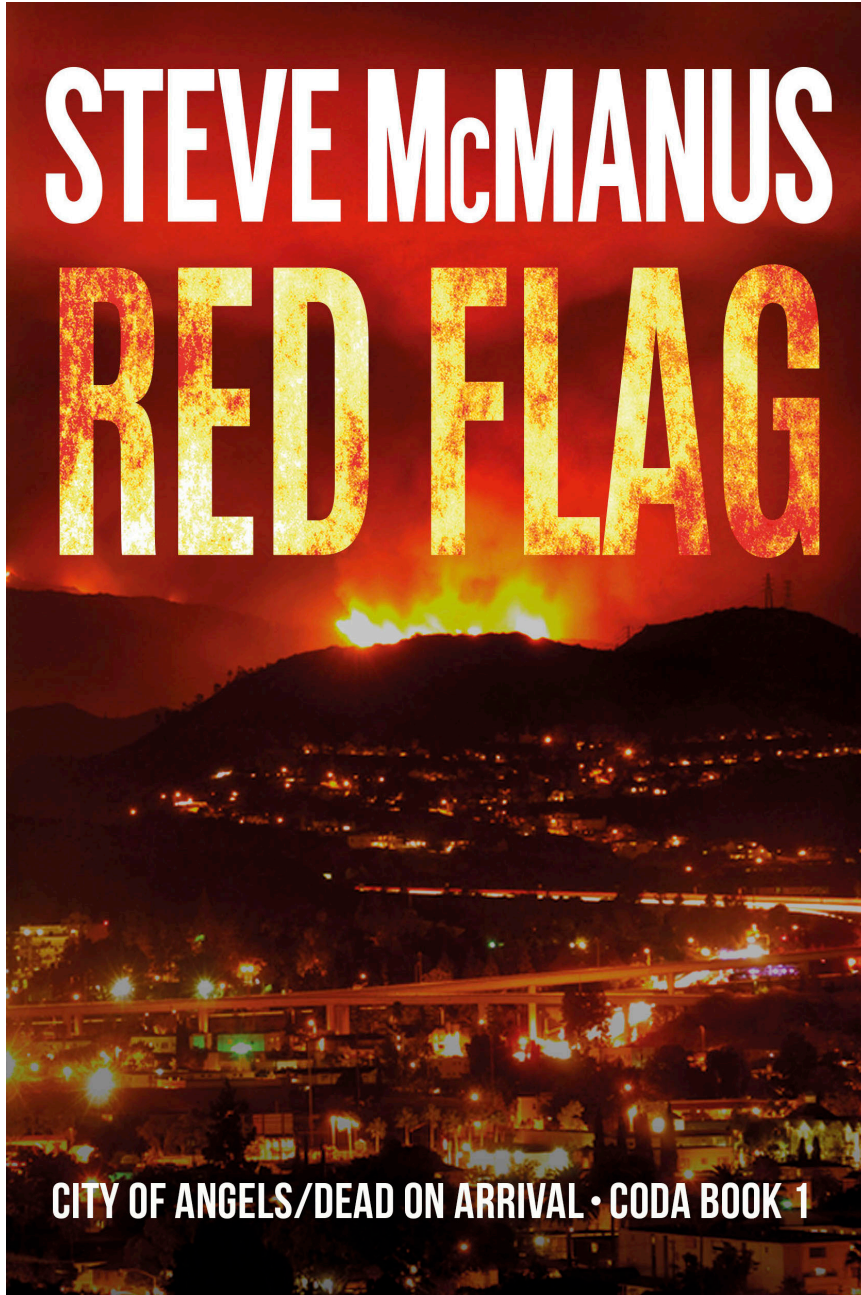
“Attaboy. Deputy Brown here will escort you back to your car. I’ll call you later.”

They shook hands and Danny followed the uniformed deputy back up the fire road. The burned body had been shrouded from view mainly because of the news helicopters overhead, for which he was grateful. He wouldn’t have the chance for a second look, a clearer picture. He wished he could move the image to a memory stick and forget he’d ever seen it at all.

He quickly texted an update to Red Flag—Malibu fire dubbed Backbone. Intentionally set. Out of control and growing.

The Angeles Arsonist is back.

And he’d just killed five people.



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