

Bat Cave Jasper

A Mystery in 24 Display Cases

by Karl Stull

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The 24 Display Cases

Case title	Created by
Pinkie	Ken Tanaka, vice-president (deceased)
Wired Weird	Marianne Avalone, newsletter editor
Tumbling	Luis Regalo, benefactor
Geodes à-Go-Go	James and Roz McCleggy, gossips
Picture Jasper	Heinrich Blatt, The Jocular Geologist
Ancient Oasis	Roy Avalone, president
Fire in the Hole	Delbert Musselman, Annual Show chair
It's All Quartz	Millie Zhang, treasurer
Space, 1876	Ed Bailey, Field Trips chair
Toothless Saws	Suzette Sanger, Workshop chair
Time's Shadow	Hector Pradera, junior in high school
Rocco's Pizza	Coral Finchum, Membership chair
Quartzsite	Linda Pradera, nurse, single mother
Tragic Turquoise	Lucius Tiber, secretary
Owl Hole	Doris Drusenberg, lifetime member
San Gabriels Gold	Soapy Stovall, prospector
Diorite Dice	Margot Arrete, jewelry teacher
Sabaku-ishi	Sandra Shore, psychic consultant
Passion of the Gem Trees	Will Meyer, small business (gift shop)
Mosaic Tortoise	Shane Grandville, artist
Village of Spheres	Mina Blatt, impresario / Speechless Theater
Spiral Snailcase	Akira Saito, marine engineer
Bat Cave Jasper	Mike Banks, sculptor
Bolo Ties	Chuckawalla Slim, founding father

Prologue

A step and a half too far, he thought. Scree rolled like ball bearings under his boots. He was leaning upslope, trying to get his balance, when a jab above the ear turned him hard to one side. His downhill leg slid out. He was falling.

Time slowed. Panic melted into shock. He observed the canyon wall rotating away, as if by some camera trick. He saw the parked cars rising. He saw Will and Tina, with eyes only for each other. He was alone, looking into an immaculate blue sky.

It was a shame, ending like this. He regretted arguing with Suzette. He forgave Del for his pig-headedness. It didn't matter anymore. Never did really. Then out of the blue, he thought of Shane. "Pebbles are pixels," Shane had said. No, Ken thought, now seeing the big picture, the really big picture of the whole world and all its history — no, we are pixels. Ken wondered idly if that was wisdom or just a —.

His fall came to a crushing stop at an anvil-shaped outcrop. A canvas bag flew from his grip, scattering gray-green pebbles into the scrub. Lucius, Ed, and Suzette clambered down to render aid, hurrying but taking careful steps. By the time they reached his broken body, there was nothing left of Ken Tanaka but the four words he would say to Marianne.

Chapter 1

Pinkie

They say the eyes are windows to the soul. I say try the display cases at a rockhound show. A typical show has a couple dozen cases, mostly personal collections. Some are educational or may be organized around a theme like “Look What the Glacier Dragged In.” A case with a theme is like a tiny stage, and the rocks are players. They have no entrances or exits, but they speak their piece. A few make you laugh. I’ve only ever seen one person cry in front of a display case. Now and then, a case may leave you staggering from beauty shock.

I’m not a rockhound. I went to the Reseda Gem and Mineral Society show because Uncle Luis owns the venue, a hangar at the local airport. Sally came with me because she actually likes rocks. On hikes in the Santa Monica Mountains, she used to pick up this rock or that because it was pretty or showed a streak of unexpected color. She would turn me around to put her rock in my backpack. Eventually these rocks ended up in pots with favored plants on our patio. Sally told the plants their new friend would look nice and help them grow. Sometimes the rocks had names, such as Ginger or Lefty.

Sally and I ambled into the hangar for the RGMS show through the people door. The big doors for airplanes were shut. The hangar’s regular tenants had found other places to park for the weekend — an executive jet, two bush planes, and a two-seat trainer, the latter owned by the actor who plays Mordred in the Pendragon movies. We came to a Welcome table, where cheerful ladies wearing polished-stone necklaces and bracelets encouraged us to buy raffle tickets. The raffle prizes were mostly polished-stone necklaces and bracelets made by

members of the Reseda Gem and Mineral Society. The grand prize was a refurbished gem faceting machine. Not for everybody, but interesting. Second prize was a big-screen television.

Beyond the Welcome table, the high arch of the hangar loomed like a giant soup can cut lengthwise. Four aisles of vendors in table-and-drape booths offered merchandise that rockhounds cannot resist buying over and over again — finished jewelry, supplies for making jewelry, field tools for prying and cracking rocks, shop tools for shaping and polishing rocks, books about where to find rocks, and specimens of rock from mountain ranges around the world. Slabs by the hundred lay in trays that were either filled with water or had a squirt bottle handy, because rocks look their best when wet. Sally browsed the patterns and colors, like swatches in an upholstery sample book. I marveled at how the folding-table legs stood up to the weight. And I marveled to think of these mom-and-pop vendors hauling their quarter-ton of rocks in for set-up and then hauling it all back to the truck after the show, and then rolling down the road to the next show. It seemed there was something about the life that they liked. It wasn't the money. Half were cash-only.

While Sally browsed, I ventured to the far end of the hangar. There were tables arranged in a 20-foot square with place mats, as if for a feast of rock eaters. The banner read Silent Auction. Inside the square, a man and woman in yellow and black RGMS vests buzzed back and forth, serving up the next course of rocks on the place mats. As I learned later, they were James and Roz McCleggy, the humming hive for all RGMS gossip.

I considered a potato-size gob of shiny black obsidian. Good for making arrowheads, if someday I learned how. I put the gob back on its place mat and had a look at a fire agate that Sally might have ooh-and-ah'd over. In the end, I put in a bid for a piece of tuff that looked like

it had been scooped off the top of a lemon meringue pie. Tuff is worthless, a mix of mostly air and volcanic ash, but I scrawled a bid of two dollars. A note on the bid card said: “It floats!”

It floats to this day, in a jar on my desk. Peaks of the meringue stick up above the waterline. Most of the rock hangs below the surface, like an iceberg. The air trapped inside has been in there 15 million years. I change the water on Mondays, unless I’m out.

I came to a line of tables set up for Demonstrations. At the first table, a teenage boy with hair like bunch grass — Hector Pradera, by his name badge — ran a grinder/polishing machine with six wheels whirring. He wore a face mask to keep rock dust out of his young lungs. Every rockhound knows silicosis is bad news.

“Labradorite,” he said, showing me a pecan-size stone. He applied the stone to the second wheel, smoothing the dome shape, and moved on to the third and fourth wheels, starting to bring a shine to the surface. He pointed to an array of finished cabochons on a stand. “There’s a cab I finished earlier.”

The finished labradorite was mid-ocean blue. Polishing had revealed depths in the blue that you could stare into for hours, and maybe read the future. People read a lot into rocks.

“Nice,” I said.

With a nod, Hector agreed the result was awesome and returned to polishing at the next wheel.

At the second table sat the wise owl of RGMS, the club’s senior member, Doris Drusenberg. Doris was built like a sequoia, and her skin was the color of stained oak, as if from a lifetime of playing poker in smoke-filled rooms. Her wide-open eyes were set in big round sockets, giving her a permanent look of surprise turning into dismay. On the table in front of her were specialty pliers — round jaws, half-round, squared, stepped, bent — for any challenge of fit

or flourish. Doris was demonstrating how to create a custom setting for a polished stone using silver wire.

At the third table, Master Sergeant Tyrell Banks (Retired) was carving a cameo. In his right hand, he had a dentist's drill, or something like it. His left hand steadied a small slab of rock with two layers, like a sandwich cookie with the top taken off. The "creme" layer was cut to a shape like George Washington's profile on the US quarter — strong jaw, stalwart nose, deep-set eyes that gazed slightly upward, and the goofy wig with curls in back. Banks, known to all as Mike, short for Michelangelo, was putting finishing touches to the bow on Washington's pigtail.

"I bet this takes your mind to another place," I said.

"I've lost many an afternoon," Mike agreed.

"Is it hard to learn?"

"Not so hard," he said. "The main thing is patience, and working carefully."

He turned the cameo toward me. "Look here. I got started when I realized — looking at a quarter — a profile is mostly an outline. I had no experience as an artist, but I knew I could draw an outline."

Turning the rock back to himself, he said, "The rock helps you along, by resisting, by making you go slow. The art of carving is bringing the picture out one slow sliver at a time."

"Do many rockhounds carve?"

"You'll see examples over there in the display cases. The club has a class every year for beginners."

"I'm feeling inspired," I said.

"Take the class, so you learn to work safely. Rock dust kills."

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Display cases come in two types: look-down and look-ahead. The look-down type is what you find in jewelry stores, with a god's eye view of pretty things below. The view into a straight-ahead case is like an old-time theater, where you see performers on the stage with a large space above them. Dramatists use the space above for Juliet's balcony or Peter Pan flying from London to Neverland. Rockhounds often use that upper space as a marquee, announcing the theme of the display. However, some use the height of the back wall to display supporting players behind the star of the show — like chorus singers hanging out of windows in a Busby Berkeley musical.

At the RGMS show, the display case titled "Pinkie" filled its space with a spectrum of one color. Pink. There was a Mayan pyramid in the background built up in blocks of pink marble. Tall vases of rose quartz stood to one side, topped with garnet flowers. A rhodonite queen held court, her feathered cape hung wide on outspread arms. A pencil-like shaft of tourmaline was her scepter. Petals of pink spinel lay at her feet. The ID tag said the case was submitted by a man, Ed Bailey.

The queen was an ingenious carving, simple and strong. The rock had been oriented and cut in such a way that rivers of black in the strawberry ice cream stone became the queen's mantilla of thick, untamable hair. The fullness of her hair rose from her forehead and temples, flowing away like ocean swells. Her eyes held two flecks of obsidian for pupils. Her eyelids were draped, like half-dome canopies over cafe windows. Her gown was a living map of rivers and valleys in pink and black.

"Here you are," said Sally, giving me a push of reproach for wandering off.

"Take a look," I said. "It's pink-mania in there."

“Let’s see,” said Sally, nose almost to the glass.

Sally has an uncanny talent for recognizing when coworkers have slept together. Usually it’s a matter of how much or how little personal space one of them is comfortable with. Attentiveness, vocabulary, details they somehow happen to know, permissions they don’t seem to need. As Sally likes to say, parameters change after you’ve seen one another naked. I don’t know if Sally is always right, but I never assume she’s wrong.

“Looks like Ed Bailey loves this girl Pinkie,” she said, “a lot.”

“Pinkie is a person and not just a personification of pink? Your facts, please.”

“The case may seem like a salute to the color. But everything in there could be put together in an afternoon — except for one item, the queen. Carving the queen took dozens of hours, maybe hundreds with polishing. All those details, the folds in her gown, the feathers etched into the cape, one by one. This is devotion on a scale that would make Eleanor of Aquitaine swoon.”

“Who’s Eleanor of Aqua Stain?” I asked.

“Eleanor of Aquitaine wrote the book on courtly love.”

“So the pink queen is someone real, and the sculptor was in love with her.”

“Without a doubt,” said Sally. “And they had sex.”

“Come on.”

“It’s obvious.”

“What is it about this pink and black queen in a cape that tells you she had sex with her artist-admirer?”

“First off, he doesn’t overestimate the size of her breasts.”

“What?”

“He has seen and admired them at leisure, so they are in proportion to other features of a body that the artist has come to know well. Notice, in a pre-bra world, they point amiably outward.”

“Not forward like warheads.”

“The queen has a mole near her left collarbone, and crow’s feet. I think our artist kissed the corners of her eyes many times and teased her about her fears of looking old. These are details you would only include if you treasured them in someone you loved.”

I had to admit, you don’t often see crow’s feet on statues of women.

“Notice the one slipper bulging slightly into the hem of the gown. It’s a spontaneous detail, unsymmetrical, taken from life. The conclusion is inescapable: Pinkie posed for a sketch in a silky nightgown. The sketch then guided the carving of this queen.”

“Amazing, Holmes!”

“Elementary, my dear,” Sally replied. Her last name is Heimkranz. Close enough.

“Is that all?”

“As you look at the pose, notice her bent elbows. An artist working strictly from concept would tend to make the arms straight and rigid, because that’s our idea of command. But a live model, holding a bedsheet on her outstretched arms for twenty minutes, might flex a little and maybe put her weight on one foot, and nudge the other foot playfully outward — thus!”

Sally threw her arms out, mimicking the Pinkie pose. Passers-by turned to see what was up. Sally smiled, happy to enrich their afternoons. She said, “Kiss me, baby.”

I did.

“Pinkie was a lucky woman,” Sally said into my ear, then adding, “unless, of course,

she happened to be married to someone else at the time.”

Disentangling, holding Sally at arms’ length, I said, “Pinkie was having an affair with Ed Bailey.”

“Shshshsh!” said Sally.

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The other display cases were engaging in their own ways. There was a case of “Day Trip Rocks,” showing agates and jaspers, marbles, geodes, and other goodies collected not too far from Reseda: in the coastal mountains; in the transverse San Gabriel and San Bernardino mountains, which shield Los Angeles from the wrath of the desert; and in the Cady and Calico mountains of the Mojave. This case was submitted by the wise owl of RGMS, Doris Drusenberg.

In a satiric perspective, Heinrich Blatt’s “Shells in the Desert” showed in-situ photos of ancient sea fossils — those were in the left half of the case. On the right were shell casings left behind by weekend target shooters. The signage on the left said “Late Miocene, 6 million years ago”; on the right, “Anthropocene, last week.”

A display case submitted by rock-carver Mike Banks showed examples of work from last year’s carving class. An early assignment had students drawing lines and curves in howlite, a waste mineral found near gypsum mines. Another was to saw a leaf shape out of a slab of opalized wood and then give the leaf a rounded, lifelike surface, adding veins as a final touch. A third assignment transformed an assortment of beach rocks, each bearing a likeness of George Washington.

“Shall we join this club?” I asked.

“Let’s rock,” said Sally.

Chapter 2

Wired Weird

We found the Membership table at the front, near the hangar entrance. We sat in folding chairs to fill out an application. In addition to name and address, the form asked for occupation, hobbies, level of rockhounding experience, and memberships in other clubs. These questions led to a list of check boxes for Areas Where You Might Volunteer: photography, writing for the newsletter, website, workshop maintenance, field trip assistant, annual show staff, etc. There were check boxes also for Subjects You Want to Learn More About. The form was longer than a short form but shorter than a 1040.

The man at the Membership table was a retired firefighter and looked the part. Beefy, buzz haircut, steady eyes. The name tag on his yellow and black RGMS vest said Ed Bailey.

I threw a side look to Sally: the same Ed Bailey who carved Pinkie? Sally's eyebrows went up.

Ed scanned our application. He leaned back and raised his hand, getting someone's attention at the Welcome table. He said to us, "I see you're interested in rock carving. We have a top guy who does our carving classes, Mike Banks."

I said I had just met Mike and liked him a lot.

"And you're interested in field trips."

"We'd like to learn about local rocks," said Sally, "and where collecting is permitted."

Ed took a breath. A rueful line formed above his eyes. "Fact is, gem-quality rocks are not as plentiful as they were in past years, the glory days." Ed tipped his head to the side, as if he

pictured old-timers with mules grabbing agates and opals by the handful. “I lead a field trip every month. We go to the desert or the coast, and there is still good material to find. And plenty of outdoors to enjoy.”

“That’s what we want,” said Sally.

“Once a year we try to schedule a longer trip. Five days or so to Idaho, Arizona, maybe Jade Cove and the central coast. We haven’t been to Mexico in a while. Too dangerous now in the back country.”

“That’s a shame,” I said. “Do you find good material for carving on local trips? I was admiring your ‘Pinkie’ display case earlier.”

Sally bumped my shoe under the table.

“Thank you for saying so. Having ‘Pinkie’ in the show this year meant a lot to me.” Ed paused, allowing a freight train of feeling to roll by. “But, to answer your question, a good onyx for carving is hard to find anywhere nowadays.”

“The pink and black material?” I asked. “I like the way the streams of black become her hair in the carving.”

“That’s rhodonite. From Mexico.” Ed’s gaze shifted. He said, “Here comes Marianne.”

Marianne Avalone, newly arrived from the Welcome table, took a seat beside Ed Bailey. She had black hair like Pinkie’s, thick and untamable. It was cut shorter now than in the display case, forming a circle like a nimbus in a painting of adoration. Her eyelids were draped, not hooded, and crow’s feet appeared when she smiled, which was always. By the open collar of her shirt, I saw a mole, and I saw that Sally saw it too. Unmistakably, Marianne was Pinkie.

“This is Marianne Avalone.” Ed pushed our application form over to her for reference.

“Marianne is editor of the RGMS newsletter, and she will be your new member guide. Your new

member guide helps you getting started in club activities, and meeting people who are knowledgeable in your areas of interest. You're lucky — Marianne is our best."

"Thank you, Ed. You're sweet," said Marianne. She wore a wedding ring. "Truthfully, Ed is the best in SoCal for field trips. He's out there every weekend, scouting sites and road conditions."

The space between Ed's chair and Marianne's was not unduly close, nor was it unsociably far. Neither touched the other as they talked, and there were no lingering gazes or furtive glances. No sparks, no awkward icicles. If I had never seen the "Pinkie" display case, I would have thought Ed and Marianne were mere acquaintances, part of a circle that included good friends, but these two felt no more toward each other than ordinary good will. Either Ed and Marianne were masters of deception, or we were missing important facts. Could Sally have read the "Pinkie" display case all wrong? I dismissed the notion out of hand. Sally was listening to Marianne.

"Welcome to the Reseda Gem and Mineral Society," said Marianne. Her smile came naturally. It was a smile that made you feel comfortable immediately, like a shot of rye. I cannot imagine what life would be like making people comfortable. With a glance at the form, Marianne said, "Welcome, Sally Heimkrantz. Welcome, Romeo Davis."

Next came the Romeo question. Everyone asks if my name is really Romeo.

"If you don't mind my asking," said Marianne, "wherefore art thou Romeo?"

She laughed at having quoted Shakespeare. I laughed too. Sally went along. She has heard variations of this dialogue many times. For me, the interest women feel automatically on hearing that my name is Romeo — well, it never gets old. For Sally, it is a symptom of pie-eyed gullibility in me and in most of womankind.

“My mother was Rita Davis, an actress who loved everything Shakespeare. She played all the great roles, including King Lear in an all-woman production at Ashland. My mother loved the Bard, and therefore am I Romeo.”

“How interesting!” Marianne exclaimed, sharing her pleasure with both Sally and me. “Now, as Ed was saying, my role is to help you make connections in your areas of interest. Mike is the man for carving, of course, but you might also like talking with other beginners and intermediate students. Field trips are a great way to share an experience and get to know people. If you have a rock you want identified, ask Doris Drusenberg. She’s our senior member, and she knows them all. Also, be sure to visit our workshop for orientation, even if you don’t plan to polish stones or make jewelry. Suzette Sanger is the boss of the workshop, and she will show you how to cut out a pendant on a trim saw — which we all need to do sooner or later. We’re rockhounds, right? We can’t help it.”

Marianne took our picture for the newsletter. She asked about our jobs, other interests, travels, languages, unique experiences, encounters with celebrities...

“I ask so many questions because I’m a journalist,” Marianne explained, “and because people keep giving me amazing answers. I freelance for *LA Weekly*.”

To the job question, Sally answered, “I manage a marketing graphics group at HealthCore.”

“Is that really satisfying, as a creative job dealing with the arts, or is it a soul-crushing treadmill in corporate Hell?”

Sally sighed. “Being a middle manager is the worst well-paid job in the world. But I have Romeo in my life, and we both like hiking, factory tours, collections in museums. We just went to the LA County Museum of Natural History.”

“I know! The gem collection in the dark vault — with tiny spotlights — it’s spectacular!”

“It’s brilliant,” Sally agreed.

“And many faceted,” I added.

“Romeo, you’re such a card. Tell me what you do.”

I described my occupation as Business Planner for Regalo Properties, which means I attend to whatever my uncle Luis Regalo needs to have done. I go to client meetings, audit the books, fill in for the night watchman during a family emergency, go pick up lunch when my uncle wants albondigas soup from Tranquilina’s. I haven’t murdered anybody. Uncle Luis hasn’t asked for that. I am writing a novel. And I recently bought a 20-year-old flatbed truck with a vague idea of starting a traveling theater group, Reseda Pop-Up Players. We’ll do scenes from Shakespeare and Euripides at lunch time for offices and schools, and maybe some one-act plays by local writers. But my real vocation in life is being in love with a woman who loves me back. Sally and I commit every morning before we get out of bed. We talk about what we plan to make of the coming day, whether together or apart. Not all of this made it into my two-line bio in the RGMS newsletter.

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A birdcage made of 22-gauge, dead soft, stainless steel wire hung in the top left corner of the display case submitted by Marianne Avalone. The cage was empty. The door hung open. High on the back wall of the case, an epigraph in modern, black, italic letters read:

...stone imprisoned,

Beauty set free...

The case presented examples of wire-wrapping. Left to right, the styles progressed from formal

and fancy to eccentric and expressive. There were many more pieces on the right. The case floor was angled upward for maximum head-on viewing. The gathered schools of wraps formed a rising mountainside, like a bar graph of a great year on Wall Street.

The first group was a pair of identical plume agates, cut from successive slabs of the same rock. One was wrapped as Louis XIV might have liked, with a four-wire bundle encircling the stone and spreading at the top into a fountain of loops and swirls, with a bail for a necklace hidden somewhere within. The four wire-ends were tucked discreetly out of sight. The other agate was more East German Apartment Block in style, with a groove around the perimeter holding a single heavy wire. The ring on top for the necklace might have fallen out of a carburetor.

Next came the Stone-Sensitive Group. For oval and rectangular stones, the wraps were like picture frames, with the frame tending to be more modest when the stone had a strong “picture.” With stones of very irregular shape, the wire had to wrap across the face for engineering reasons. Face-crossing wires became bolder and even pictorial in themselves when stones were tricky to hold. A jade teardrop became a bottle of Chianti with brass wire wrapped like straw around the base. A convincingly outlined apron turned an amorphous malachite into a peasant woman stooped to hard work.

The Hat Group dealt with excess wire by twirling it into headgear: a fez, a bowler, and a Stetson topped three apparently unoffended jaspers. The hats were part of a larger experiment in expressive wire, in which the stone was an artistic partner or, at times, a mere canvas. Layered rocks lent themselves to Mondrian-like compositions with wire defining and linking geometric forms. Shield-shaped cabochons made up a Sir Dada of Chivalry Group, in which wires-errant crossed, crowned, and crenellated any feature that could be taken for a heraldic mark —

chevrons in marble, a broadsword-like pegmatite in basalt, a yellow Grail in brecciated jasper. In some of these pieces, it seemed the wire was so full of itself that it couldn't be bothered with providing a loop for a necklace. The bail was glue-on.

In the finale group, the very idea of stones being worn as pendants fell away. The cabochons became larger. The wire surged over stone like splashes of paint in the tantrum school of art. Wires emerged like worms from drilled holes and slithered along sediment beds, leapt over inclusions, and raced the rapids of twisting mineral veins. Across a slab of Graveyard Point plume agate, a frantic copper wire spiked like a heart monitor. The last piece was on a plain black slab of basanite. A silver outline of a woman in funeral dress, her shoulders bent, her veil hanging forward, almost to her knees, was a portrait of grief.

Commenting on Marianne's case, Sally said, "It's as if the stone were found art, and the artist a tagger spraying wire."

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Marianne smiled unabashed, with crow's feet, when Sally asked about her display case. Sally loved the little hats, and Marianne said she loved them too and was thinking about other hats she might try, such as an Easter bonnet. Marianne added modestly that there were many wire-wrappers in the club who had far more experience and skill than herself.

"My husband Roy is one. His cabs won first place at the national level, zero deductions in all categories. Did you see his case today?"

"Yes," Sally said. "I don't know anything about judging cabochons, but I could see they were clean and beautiful."

"That's Roy by the entrance, taking a turn as a greeter. He's club president."

Roy Avalone was a distinguished-looking man, tall and graceful, with a full crop of white

hair combed back.

“You wouldn’t believe how strict the judges are,” said Marianne. “They ding you for the slightest fault, any asymmetry, nicks that can only be seen with a magnifying glass. Whew!”

“You titled your display case ‘Wired Weird.’ Is that to let traditionalists know you dance to a different drummer?”

“Yeah, but I’m a writer at heart, and I couldn’t resist that weird is an anagram of wired. Truthfully, I don’t think my stuff is weird at all. I think I’m the most normal person in the room.”

“Oh, hell,” Sally said. “I thought I was the normal person in the room.”

Marianne laughed and gave Sally a hug. “I’m glad you’re joining the club.”

Marianne gave us an RGMS newsletter, a booklet of club rules and safety practices for field trips and the workshop, and an order form for RGMS hats, vests, and t-shirts. “Would you like to meet a few people, or is it enough for today?”

“It’s time to head home,” Sally said. “Hamish is waiting for his dinner.”

“If you wouldn’t mind my asking,” I interjected. “I was very caught up in Ed Bailey’s display case...”

Marianne seemed to freeze. Her smile was still there but the happiness had flown south. I went ahead.

I asked, “Are you Pinkie?”

An epoch passed or possibly an eon. Then Marianne said, “Yes, that was a nickname for me a while back.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I see I shouldn’t have asked.”

Sally put her arm around Marianne’s shoulder. “Don’t let Romeo spoil things. He’s an oaf sometimes.”

“It’s all right.” Marianne pulled herself together, put a sociable face back on. “It was a rough time. All that is in the past now. Really, it’s a tribute that you recognized me from the carving.”

“We’ll say no more about it,” Sally promised.

“Thank you,” Marianne said, then added: “You did recognize me from the carving? You didn’t hear someone talking about it?”

“I recognized you from the carving,” I said.

“I feel silly, overreacting. The three of us are going to be good friends, I know it. So we’ll see you at the meeting — in two weeks. Be sure to come!”

She waved, as if we were departing on a voyage around the world and she had to stay home. We waved back. The hangar’s big door being shut, we exited through the people-door.

Chapter 3

Tumbling

My office is a desk and a bookcase in a back corner of Regalo's Rockhound Shop. A barred window looks out to an alley and some parking, which cars have to share with a dumpster. Uncle Luis has a lapidary worktable at the front of the store. Pedestrians on Reseda Boulevard stop to watch through the picture window as he pries stones out of settings or puts them back in with tiny tools. His flip-down magnifying lenses make Uncle Luis look like a mad scientist, the headband gathering his hair like pampas grass. He comes into the shop a few times a week, getting away from the hectic pace of business at Regalo Properties. A bell rings over the door when a customer walks in — which can be several times a day during the busy season. Uncle Luis helps the customer find the rock tumbler to meet their needs. He scoops four grades of grit into paper bags and marks them as Rough, Medium, Fine, and Polish. He writes an itemized receipt on a pad with carbon paper, just as he did in the 1950s.

I was reading up on state and federal incentives for solar panels when Uncle Luis came by to ask about the RGMS show. He is a nominal member of the club and its unofficial angel, providing space once a year for the show and, in a building adjacent to the hangar, a permanent home for the RGMS workshop. Uncle Luis enjoys being an angel, and his generosity brings tax benefits. RGMS is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit.

"How's Roy Avalone? Did you meet him?"

"Not to talk to, but he seemed good. We met his wife Marianne."

"Oh, that young wife of his. Not bad, eh?" Uncle Luis grinned. "It goes to show, older men still have something to offer."

"If you say so, *viejo*."

"No, seriously, a man of years and achievement can be exciting to young eyes."

"And the arthritic cracking of joints to young ears."

"Ay! But there's another thing about Roy Avalone."

"What's that?"

"He's an environmentalist hero. He wrote that book, *The Death of Death Valley*. It's in the bookcase behind you, though you are too young and impetuous to notice."

"Environmental hero and a writer — that sounds right for Marianne. She's a writer."

"I see the dawn begins to break in your young mind."

"She and Sally hit it off right away. I almost made her cry."

"*Cabron*, how do I trust you with my business?"

I told Uncle Luis about the Ed Bailey display case and the carving of Pinkie, and about our then meeting Ed Bailey and Marianne Avalone.

"I am sorry for my friend Roy," said Uncle Luis. "It's a fact these clubs are a hotbed for romance. People join the club because of love, their love for rocks. They bring rocks to meetings and share their love with others. It's no surprise if the next thing there's magma."

"Magma?"

"What you get from rubbing two rocks together."

"I see."

"But you know — now that I think about it, there's no way Ed Bailey carved the pink queen in that display case."

“Why not?”

“Ed Bailey couldn’t carve a turkey. He’s the field-trip guy, been in the club forever. Ed makes bolo ties.”

+ + +

The “Tumbling” display case submitted by Luis Regalo was a regular at RGMS shows, appearing year after year. At the center of the display was a beginner’s 3-pound rotary tumbling machine, the best-seller at Regalo’s Rockhound Shop. There was no advertising in the case, but show visitors received a Welcome/Map brochure on arrival that included an ad for the shop and a discount coupon for the tumbler.

The all-rubber barrel of the tumbler was positioned so it nestled visually within the arc of a breaking wave in the background — an oil painting Uncle Luis commissioned specially for the display case. The artist was a clerk at Magnifico Art Supplies, in the same building as Regalo’s Rockhound Shop.

A card propped up against the tumbler read:

Tumbles with sand and water,

like the ocean, but faster

In front of the tumbler, like a spilled dish of hard candy, was an array of parti-colored rocks from Agate Beach, Humboldt County. Mostly they were almond-sized, a few large enough for skipping stones — red, orange, yellow, green, blue.

At the left, a platform showed stones “Before Tumbling.” They were dull in color but already rounded and fairly smooth, due to years of tumbling in the ocean, before they were collected by beachcomber Luis Regalo. As he says to customers, “Let the ocean do the prep

work. The tumbler at home peels off the outer layer, brings up the colors, and leaves a shiny finish.”

At the right, another platform showed “Best Stones to Tumble.” The example rocks were labeled:

- Hard (no cracks or crumbles)
- Super-fine grain (coarse does not shine up)
- Rounded (sharp edges cut other rocks in the tumbler)
- Convex (no caves, they trap grit)

“Rocks are like people,” Uncle Luis liked to say. “Over the years, they get worn down. Rocks that work best and look good in the end, they are the ones that are hard enough to hold up, but also roll well with others. No jagged edges. No crannies.”

The big-screen television that was the second prize in the RGMS raffle was donated by an electronics repair shop next to Magnificent Art Supplies, yet another tenant in the building owned by Regalo Properties.

+ + +

As a couple, Sally and I have developed a system for putting together jigsaw puzzles. I find and fit the outside pieces with straight edges while she works on the middle. This strategy gives me time to make coffee and microwave popcorn while she continues to plug in pieces with blebs in all directions. We chat, the three of us, Hamish having a chair of his own at the game table. Usually he just agrees with one or the other of us, with that tongue-dangling, happy-dog grin that West Highland White Terriers are known for.

“I’m looking for a piece with two yellow boobs,” Sally said, sorting through the pile of unstraight pieces. I joined in the search.

"That's an unusual way to describe a jigsaw puzzle piece."

"It will help focus your male mind."

"I should resemble that remark," I replied. "By the way, Uncle Luis agrees that Ed Bailey is not the one who carved Pinkie."

"Based on what?"

"He said Ed Bailey couldn't carve a turkey."

I slid a puzzle piece to Sally that fit the bi-mammary in yellow description. She eyed it, nodded.

"What are we looking for next?"

"We are looking for anything that has this brick color." Sally pointed to the picture on the jigsaw-puzzle box. "So the question is: if Ed Bailey didn't carve Pinkie, why is his name on the Pinkie display case."

"Ed never said he did the carving," I pointed out. "But he definitely knew the carving was in his case. He said the material was rhodonite that came from Mexico."

Sally added, "And he said having the case in the show meant a lot to him."

We pondered, and Sally sorted through puzzle pieces, flicking wrong reds to the side, corralling yellows and browns.

"It's strange he didn't say who did the carving, while we were talking about it."

"A little strange. Maybe he thought you already knew."

"How would I know? I'm new to the club."

"Maybe he thought it was unimportant who did the carving. You were asking about good carving materials."

"True," I said. "Here's another angle to consider: does Ed Bailey know that Pinkie is

Marianne Avalone?"

"That's an interesting question," Sally said, looking up from the puzzle. "Marianne wanted to know if we figured it out by ourselves. She was worried about gossip. It's possible there hasn't been any gossip. You and I might be the only ones who made the connection."

"I don't know, the likeness is pretty obvious. The hair, the crow's feet, the mole."

"Obvious to us because we studied the carving and then immediately met Marianne. The figurine is only seven inches tall. The resemblance is only there if you're looking for it."

"There's a lot we don't know," I said. "I'd better make coffee."

I went to the kitchen, Hamish on my heels. He gets a treat at evening coffee time. I set two *cafés au lait* in thick, diner-style cups on the game table, and posed another question.

"Does it seem improbable to you that a no-nonsense he-man like Ed Bailey would put together an all-pink display case?"

"Very improbable, even for laughs."

"So not only is the carving not by Ed Bailey, the whole display case is by someone other than Ed Bailey."

"Looks that way," Sally said. "Man or woman."

"Then we're back to why is Ed Bailey's name on the display case."

Sally lingered over a sip of coffee, holding its heat near her lips. "Somebody asked Ed to put the case in the show. To ask that favor, the somebody must have been close friends with Ed. This close friend was having an affair with Marianne, so it figures Ed may have known about it. Why would Ed agree to put the case in the show under his own name? He's

a practical man, not one to come between a bear and his honey.”

The doorbell rang. Hamish leapt from his chair and skidded to the front door. He launched into a barking tirade, ferocity level 10, in case he had to face down a motorcycle gang. Hamish is very serious about his job as guardian of the gate.

“*Tranquilete*, Hamish,” a voice called. “It’s Luis.”

Sally opened the door for Uncle Luis and welcomed him with a hug. He apologized for dropping in. He had papers for me that had to go to the city clerk’s office in the morning. He pulled a treat from his pocket for Hamish, who knew it was coming.

“Would you like some coffee?”

“Sorry, Teresa’s waiting,” said Uncle Luis. “I see you’re working on a jigsaw puzzle.”

“Stinky TV night,” Sally said.

“Jigsaw puzzles are good for relaxing the mind,” said Uncle Luis, “although I cannot bear them myself.”

“Really, *por qué no?*”

“So many little pieces,” sighed Uncle Luis, “only one way they fit together. It’s very *norteño*, if you don’t mind my saying.”

“I see what you mean,” Sally said.

“We were just talking about Ed Bailey.” I waved Uncle Luis to a chair. “Do you remember Ed Bailey having close friends in the club, or a best friend?”

Uncle Luis sat in the chair next to me. “Ed Bailey has been around forever. He’s on good terms with everybody.”

“Anyone stand out in your mind, someone he would share secrets with?”

“I see, you are thinking about the business with Roy Avalone’s wife.”

Uncle Luis deepened the wrinkles in his brow, pulled at his chin. "I heard he was tight with a new guy, kind of a rabble-rouser, by the name of Ken Tanaka."

"How does anyone get to be seen as a rabble-rouser in a rockhound club?"

"It's been a while since I was in touch. I think Ken was very big on getting RGMS recognized as the number one rockhound club in the USA. The AFMS awards a trophy for that every year."

"And wanting RGMS to be number one was controversial?"

"Oh, there was a feeling Ken Tanaka wanted too many changes. People thought the club was fine the way it was."

"But Ed Bailey took sides with Ken Tanaka."

"I guess Ed thought the club needed new energy. The leadership was a little set in their ways."

"What kind of changes did Ken Tanaka want?"

"He was very focused on winning the AFMS award. So there were lots of little things he pushed for. He wanted everyone to wear their yellow and black vests to other clubs' events. That was one."

"Seems a little impolite," I said.

"The idea was to get photographs of RGMS members supporting other clubs. The photos would make a favorable impression in the AFMS competition, according to Ken."

"Was Ken Tanaka good looking?" Sally asked.

"*Guapa*, you could say better than I," Uncle Luis replied. "To this day, I believe I am good-looking."

"Of course, you are good looking, *tio*. Romeo is lucky I met him before I laid eyes on

you.”

“You’re going to give me a heart attack,” said Uncle Luis. “Oh, you are working on the Grand Canyon.”

“One million pieces,” I said.

Eying the puzzle box, and gauging the pile of still-loose puzzle pieces, Uncle Luis said, “So many pieces. It’s a very big hole in the ground.”

Chapter 4

Geodes à-Go-Go

After food, sex, aversion to loss, and fear of humiliation, the strongest influence on human behavior is “aha!” A sudden realization feels good. It lights up the mind and leaves an afterglow of self-congratulation. “Aha!” is the reward you feel when you get a joke, solve a puzzle, have an epiphany, or discover the real reason why things are the way they are. It is also the sauce to scandal and gossip. “Aha!” is the opposite of “uh oh.”

Sally and I went to our first RGMS monthly meeting about two weeks after the show at the hangar. We stuck our heads tentatively into the big meeting room at the Reseda community center. There were rows of plastic chairs, a podium, and people milling around. Marianne swooped up to greet us, with hugs, and led the way to a hospitality table. Sally took care of the sign-in sheet while I drew two coffees from an urn that had known Eisenhower as president. There was a full platter of veggies beside two well pillaged platters of homemade molasses cookies and snicker-doodles.

“With people standing around in little groups the way they do,” said Marianne, “it can be hard to join a conversation. The hospitality table is a good place to catch people between groups. Over there, the display table is another watering hole. Let’s go have a look.”

Crossing the room, Marianne introduced us to several people whose smiles and welcomes were friendly and whose names swirled down the drain of memory

“I’m going to introduce you to Roz McCleggy. She knows everybody and likes to be helpful,” said Marianne. “Two things to keep in mind about the McCleggys. The husband’s

name is James, never Jim. And never tell the McCleggys anything you don't want everyone to know."

"Got it," Sally said.

"On the other hand," I bantered, "if you want the dirt on anybody, ask a McCleggy."

Marianne's happy expression sank like the sun in December. Someday I'll learn to just shut up.

Roz McCleggy was petite but hard as Brazilian agate. A boyish haircut made her head look round. She had two dramatic strokes of charcoal for eyebrows, and at the moment they were raised.

"Ed Bailey is threatening to resign as field trips chair," she blurted to Marianne.

"Impossible," said Marianne.

"It's true. He is furious about Del tampering with his display case. He told Millie he's sick of the in-fighting." Roz McCleggy's gaze lingered on Marianne, weighing her reaction.

"I see," Marianne said. "I'd better talk to Roy."

Marianne excused herself and headed toward the podium, asking Roz to "take good care of our new members Romeo and Sally."

Roz turned to us with cat-like glee.

"Romeo? Really?" she purred. "But if you're Romeo, shouldn't you be Juliet?"

"I sent the paperwork," said Sally with a straight face. "Still waiting to hear back from Shakespeare."

"So we're still calling her Sally for now," I said.

"But your name is Romeo, legally?"

"It says so on my birth certificate," I said. "But what's the deal with Ed's display

case? The pink case with the rhodonite carving, right?"

Roz stared in wonderment. "You know about the pink display case."

"We met Ed at the show," I said, "when Sally and I joined the club. We talked with Ed about rhodonite, field trips, carving classes. Ed Bailey seems like someone who doesn't lose his temper easily."

"That's true enough," Roz said, "but Ken Tanaka was Ed's best friend."

"You say that like they're not friends anymore."

"Ken Tanaka died last year," Roz said. "On the field trip to the Calico Mountains."

"Oh, no, that's so sad," Sally said. "What happened?"

"Ken fell from an escarpment," Roz said. She paused for drama. "It was sixty feet, down a steep slope, all scree, nothing to grab onto. He landed on an outcrop of dacite."

"Ugh, you're not saying he landed on spikes, I hope."

"Dacite is a type of volcanic rock with quartz," Sally said. "It must have been awful."

Roz reflected. "Ed took it hard."

"Ed felt responsible, as field trip leader?" I asked.

"Ken Tanaka was an experienced outdoorsman. He knew how to stay out of trouble. It was just a brutal way to lose a friend."

"I see."

What I saw was that Roz felt real sympathy for Ed — in addition to satisfaction in her ownership of Ken's story.

"The display case you were asking about, 'Pinkie' — that was Ken Tanaka's case, not Ed's," said Roz. "Ed entered Ken's display case in the show as a memorial."

"But why was Ed's name on the display case? Why not Ken's?"

Roz rolled her eyes. “Del Musselman, the Show chair, refused the case under Ken’s name, on the grounds that only active RGMS members can participate.”

“That seems incredibly petty,” I said.

“Ed got around the rule by entering the case under his own name. He put Ken Tanaka’s name badge inside with an ‘In Memoriam’ card.”

“But something happened. Del tampered with the case.”

“An hour before the show, Del opened the case and removed Ken’s name badge and the ‘In Memoriam’ card.”

“Why would Del go to so much trouble, interfering in someone else’s grief?”

Roz gave me a level, life-is-hard look. “Del Musselman hated Ken Tanaka. Hated him the way a mongoose hates a cobra.”

“Time to find a seat, everybody,” a voice bellowed over the loudspeaker. A square-torso’d man with red stubble for hair and a rippling red beard stood at the podium.

“Everybody find a seat, please, so the president can call the meeting to order.”

“That’s Del Musselman, right there,” Roz said.

+ + +

The “Geodes à-Go-Go” display case submitted by James and Roz McCleggy should have credited their grandson Boz McCleggy, a Caltech student in robotics. Their case was by far the most engineered attraction at the RGMS show.

A glittering geode hung from the ceiling like a disco ball. The case was lit like a nightclub, mostly dark with footlights shining up at three platforms. The platforms were turntables, rotating at 3.33 rpm, each carrying a baseball-size geode around and around.

The geodes on the turntables were off-center, out near the rim, so they orbited like

planets around unseen suns — except these planets were cut-through and hinged at the equator. Once per orbit, they opened wide to show crystal treasures in their cores, closing again as they turned away from ogling passers-by.

The geodes à-go-go were irresistible. Strangers iammed close together at the McCleggys' case to see the three geodes open their shameless mouths and bare their sparkly teeth, one taking its turn after the other, like a parliament of dragons. Home-schooling mothers urged their mooncalf sons to behold the wonders of earth. Low-key dads in football jerseys said to their bedraggled daughters in "Kill the Police" t-shirts, "Cool."

As one group broke up, another accreted at the magic McCleggy window. Mouths opening and closing, opening and closing. . .

A dozen virgin geodes lay waiting on the floor of the display case. A mini-poster in a corner read:

See for yourself!

Free geodes for Guests at next RGMS meeting!

The geode giveaway, we later learned, was Ken Tanaka's idea.

+ + +

Del Musselman pulled at his rippled red beard while people sifted through the block of plastic chairs. When enough were seated, he waved for the RGMS president to come forward. Del Musselman stepped aside and Roy Avalone took the podium, holding on with both hands and leaning into the microphone. After Del Musselman's bellow, Roy Avalone's voice was an ghastly whisper, amplified.

"Can everyone hear me?" Feedback squealed through the sound system. Del

Musselman laid a hand on Roy's shoulder for him to pause. He adjusted the volume control.

"Is that better?" Roy asked. "I call this meeting of the Reseda Gem and Mineral Society to order."

Roy Avalone was the picture of a college faculty poet, with snowy hair, a thin alpine crag for a nose, and a soft crew-neck sweater. Over the sound system, his voice was loud enough and understandable but breathy and strained.

"Welcome. I see a number of new faces are with us this evening. Thank you for coming. We have an excellent program lined up, 'Owyhee Picture Jasper,' presented by Heinrich Blatt, The Jocular Geologist, and his wife Mina Blatt, a notable actress. Both are friends and long-time members of RGMS. First, we'll hear from our activity chairs about the annual show last month and how it all went.

"To facilitate the business of the meeting — and make my doctor happy, treating a bad case of bronchitis — I will turn over the microphone to Del Musselman, past president of RGMS and current Show chair. Take it away, Del."

Resuming the podium, Del thanked Roy and went on to thank many others by name for the success of the RGMS annual show.

"The turnstile count was 1,472 on Saturday and 1,255 on Sunday. The total attendance of 2,727 was up significantly from recent years, so it looks like the outreach campaign paid off. We should definitely continue sending RGMS ambassadors to schools, community groups, and other organizations."

"Funny," Roz said in my ear, "he hated the idea when Ken Tanaka suggested it."

"And now we'll hear the treasurer's report."

Treasurer Millie Zhang was a human hummingbird, all sudden moves. She shot up

from her chair, zipped to the podium, and seized the flexible neck of the microphone like a straw she meant to suck dry in a gulp. Pronouncing every word rapidly and distinctly, she made her report:

“Financial results from the annual show are subject to adjustment per late invoices and receipts. To date, expenses — including site rental, security, fixtures, technical support, safety, and transport to and from storage — are \$9,210. Receipts from the show — including vendor fees, raffle tickets, silent auction, and novelty sales — are \$11,260. On balance, we see a profit of \$2,050. Or perhaps I should say, since RGMS is a 501(c)(3) corporation, a nonprofit of \$2050. Thank you.”

Millie Zhang took a bullet train back to her seat.

“Good one, Millie,” said Del Musselman, transitioning to the next report. “Now, our Membership chair, Coral Finchum. Coral, how many people with us tonight are guests?”

Coral rose from her chair like the Sierra Nevada from the North American plate. People in her row leaned like affrighted cliffs as Coral pushed toward the aisle. Her slacks and jacket were beige. Rich auburn hair hung past her shoulders, brushed one hundred strokes every night. Her eyes were slitty and keen. Her voice was sweetness and light.

“Thank you, Del. We have 41 members signed into the meeting tonight, and 11 guests. Guests, will you stand, please. Let’s all make our guests feel welcome.” She started a round of applause for the guests.

“Please remain standing,” said Coral as the applause died down. “We have a geode as a gift for each of tonight’s guests, thanks to a donation from James and Roz McCleggy. If you’ll remain standing, please, Suzette Sanger, Workshop chair, will come around to each of you with her bucket of geodes. That bucket must be heavy, eh, Suzette?”

“Yo!” called the lanky and limber Suzette, doing a comic stagger with the heavy bucket in her outstretched hand. “It’ll get lighter, one rock at a time!”

“We’ll need a guest volunteer,” Coral announced, “someone to help demonstrate how we open a geode. How about this young lady right here.”

A blushing sixteen-year-old was pushed to the aisle by two giggling friends, and coaxed toward the podium, where a white-haired man in a checked shirt and bolo tie juggled three geodes with aplomb. This was James McCleggy.

With a slight country twang, which may have come with the bolo tie, James McCleggy said howdy to the meeting and asked the guest-volunteer her name, which was Yvonne, and invited everyone to contemplate the wonder that was a geode.

“It ain’t much to look at on the outside — a dirty old spud straight out of the ground. But crack it open, and you may find something spectacular inside, a city of crystal skyscrapers, or domes catching flashes of light.”

James McCleggy held an unsplit geode up high so everyone could see.

“What’s inside? There’s no guarantee we’ll find anything to dazzle the eye. There may be nothing in this rock but more rock. There is one thing we know for sure,” he said, sweeping the audience with a pointing finger.

“The one thing we know for sure is: when that rock cracks open, we will be the first to set eyes on whatever is hidden there.

“Imagine a blob of magma flying out of a volcano millions of years ago. The blob became rounder as it flew, and it cooled in the air, turning solid — with a pocket of gas in the middle. Then, plop! The nodule hit the ground and lay in the muck that surrounded the volcano. Over time, it was buried beneath layers and more layers of rock and ash. The

weight of the layers above generated pressure and heat, and then water seeped into the hollow inside the nodule. Crystals of silicon dioxide formed, building up magnificent structures with walls and windows to catch and refract the light of the Sun.”

James McCleggy squinted at the geode in his hand. He shook it near his ear, as if listening for a rattle. He held it out toward the audience. “Is that what we’ll find at the center of this rock? Are we going to be witness to the first light that touches the wonder within? Well, heck, let’s just see!”

He put on safety glasses and handed a pair to Yvonne. He offered her a geologist’s hammer, with a spike on one side and a flat head on the other. “Would you like to do the honors, Yvonne, or should I?”

They stepped over to a prepared table with an anvil and protective see-through shield. Inspecting the apple-size nodule, James McCleggy found a spot he liked for “a good, clean hit.” With a quick, short stroke of the hammer, he split the rock. Handing the halves to Yvonne, he said, “Show the folks, Yvonne. Let them see!”

A few people in the audience stood to get a better look — was it a dud or a cathedral? And then the entire audience was standing and applauding. Yvonne rose to her celebrity moment, turning the halves of the geode, stained purplish with amethyst, to show off their flashes of light.

“The power of the reveal,” Sally said. “You can’t help but gasp.”

Chapter 5

Picture Jasper

After James McCleggy's geode-cracking triumph, the time seemed right for a ten-minute break. Del Musselman began an announcement to that effect but then noticed Ed Bailey standing at his side side, waiting to take a turn at the podium.

Del considered, then shrugged.

"But first, let's hear from Ed Bailey about our next field trip. Over to you, Ed."

Del stepped aside. He had to step aside a little farther, as Ed glared him off. At last satisfied that he had the clear space properly belonging to a speaker at the podium, Ed began.

"Our next field trip will be this Saturday, north of Edwards Air Force Base. We'll start at Brown Butte, about five miles east of the town of Mojave. We'll look for palm tree fossils and root beer agate. Then we'll head east to a travertine claim, as guests of the Sierra Pelona club. Travertine is a calcium-rich mineral, easy to work. It has layers of color — browns, reds, gold, green. It makes a pretty cabochon.

"You'll have to get up early. The drive to Mojave is 90 miles, and you'll want to make a pit-stop there. We'll be in wide-open country for about six hours — with no facilities and not a lot of cover.

"It's going to get hot. Bring a hat, sunglasses, sunscreen, and plenty of water, a gallon per person. You'll find a complete list of equipment at the RGMS website — geologist's hammer, 5-gallon bucket, drag-around bag, and so on.

"The roads are in decent shape. The family sedan will be fine for this trip. Drive through

a car wash on your way home.”

Ed stopped there. The pause pooled to an awkward silence. Remembering they had been promised a break, the audience began ever so slightly to rustle.

Ed said, “One more thing.”

He looked toward the ceiling, as though deciding whether he was really going to push the button that would let the chandelier come crashing down. He nodded, hell yes.

“This might be my last field trip for the Reseda Gem and Mineral Society.”

The rustling became a susurrantion. Cancer? Divorce? A six-digit winner in the lottery? The room went ultra quiet.

In the determined voice of a firefighter, who knew what it was to enter a burning building, Ed gave this account of his dilemma.

“I’ve been an RGMS member for more than twenty years. Most of those years were good. Even in dry spells, I’ve always felt the people in this club were decent, fair-minded, and looking to help each other. We help each other, developing skills and knowledge in a personally satisfying and mostly harmless hobby, right? It’s good.

“Unfortunately, over the last couple of years, that feeling has changed. It’s all politics and in-fighting now. It’s gotten to where I can’t stand it.

“At the next meeting of the RGMS Board, I’m going to ask — . I’m going to demand that they remove Del Musselman as chair of the Annual Show Committee.”

Del Musselman, standing at the polite distance Ed had required, gripped his flame-like beard.

“Why am I taking this action against Del? Because ... this time he’s gone too far. He took personal property out of my display case at the show, without my knowledge or

permission. Del had no business tampering with my display case. He did it out of malice — because he despised Ken Tanaka. For godsakes, the man is dead, isn't he? Ken died on a field trip with our club. Is it asking so much to show a little respect?

"You may have liked Ken, or you may have thought he was too full of himself. Whatever you thought, Ken was one of us. He was a member of this club. He was the elected vice-president. We owed it to Ken to acknowledge his passing. That's why I used my display case as a memorial for him. Del had no right and no decent reason to interfere.

"Why am I going on about this? It's because one of us is going to be gone next month, Del or me. If it's me, so be it. I just want you to notice I'm gone, and think about why. That's more than Ken got from us. And that's all I have to say.

"Over to you, Del."

Ed Bailey left the podium and took a seat in the last row of the audience. Heads turned as he passed, twitching like lawn sprinklers.

Del Musselman reclaimed the podium. His beard was squeezed to a spike. He said, "Thank you, Ed. This Saturday sounds like fun for everyone."

He added, "Let's take a ten-minute break."

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Heinrich Blatt's "Picture Jasper" display case was set up like a science-fair project, with a central poster and two angled side panels. The headings on the three panels were:

- Basic
- With Blotches

- With Eggs

The panels were hung with “pictures,” as in an art gallery, except the hangings were small slabs of rock, three to six inches by two or three inches tall. All were from the Owyhee Mountains of eastern Oregon. The slabs were matted and mounted in little frames.

On the Basic wall, the slabs were from the Crisman Hill area. These all had a band of pale blue across the top and layers of browns below. The light browns were edged with pen-like strokes of dark brown that curved and overlapped like foothills, suggesting mountains in the distance. Looking at the Basic group, you realized a pale color across the top was all it took to establish a sky and horizon line. Your mind did the rest, seeing the pen strokes as ridges that separated “near” from “far.” Light browns were hillsides in afternoon sun. Dark browns were gullies in shadow.

The framed slabs on the Blotches wall came from mining claims east of Three Fingers Rock. The blotches were dendrites, residues of mineral-laden water dribbling through rock. Dendrites branching and spreading added details to the basic landscape, seen as trees, blossoms, and stalks of desert scrub. One slab, especially dramatic, had a dribble of iron like a solitary figure in widow’s weeds, gazing from a rugged cliff at the vastness of the empty plains below. These classic Owyhee Picture Jaspers suggested masterpieces Monet or Cezanne might have painted — had they ever come within 5,000 miles of an American desert.

Slabs on the third wall, the With Eggs group, came from a claim called Jake’s Place. The digs were well up a canyon wall, hard to reach. The colors were similar to the browns and pale blues in other picture jaspers, but the forms were strange — egg-shaped and concentric rather than horizontal. The blue, instead of being a band across the top, was an

oval enclosed by a thick shell of india ink. The illusion of “sky and rolling hills” gave way to eerie images of caves. Walls leading into the caves seemed to be lit by fires from deep inside.

Pen-like strokes of dark brown gave the impression of a vaulted chamber leading to a sacred mystery — or a terrible chthonic power. The walls were marked with frantic scrawls, like dancing men.

“It’s weird what the mind makes of what it sees,” said a teenager whose parents might have been goth and so named him Ælfric.

“The middle panel’s the best,” said his girlfriend, whose purple hair was gathered in a topknot like chard. “It’s Nature painting a portrait of itself. Genius!”

“It’s amazing to think,” said the third-wheel, with an earring in his eyebrow, “the ground we are walking on could be the ceiling of a natural art gallery. And we would have no clue.”

+ + +

The ten-minute break after Ed Bailey’s tirade was like a car accident where there is crushed metal and shattered glass but no blood on the pavement. Everyone looked at one another, not sure whether to call 911.

Cirrus crowds formed near the display and hospitality tables, glancing furtively toward Ed Bailey. He remained in his last-row seat, looking ahead. When someone stopped near him for a word or two, he listened and nodded.

Near the podium, Del Musselman conferred with white-haired Roy Avalone. Marianne stood beside Roy, clutching her arms as if she were cold. Suzette Sanger joined the group, still carrying her geode bucket, and then came Coral Finchum, a head taller than the others. Her

auburn hair shone like a polished antique under the utility-room lighting. She leaned into the huddle when she spoke and made jabbing motions with her finger.

James McCleggy sidled near but was sent packing.

“What do you think, Romeo?” said Roz McCleggy.

“I’m new here, Roz. What did you think?”

Roz said. “I think there’s no straighter arrow than Ed Bailey. He’s not wrong.”

“What will happen when he goes to the Board?” I asked. “Will they strip Del of his title? Or are we seeing the last of Ed Bailey?”

Roz nodded toward the gathering at the podium. “Those are the ones who will decide. They’re talking right now about what to do when Ed Bailey gives them his ultimatum.”

“You’re a close observer of humanity,” I said. “What is Coral saying — jabbing her finger in that way?”

“Coral is the hard-liner in that bunch. She’s a dyed in the wool, sin-hatin’ Baptist. Right now she is saying ‘To Hell with Ed Bailey,’ and she means it literally.”

“What about Del?”

“Del is a different kettle of fish. He and Ed have both been with the club a long time. They’re cut from the same denim. Del would be happy if he and Ed could shake hands and put it behind them.”

“Roy Avalone is a peacemaker. Can he make it happen?”

Roz turned to Sally. “Roy is a peacemaker, but the right man for the job, in this case, is a woman. Marianne is the one who can talk to Ed and speak for Ken Tanaka.”

Sally saw the logic. “Marianne knows what Ken would have wanted. Ed knows it. He won’t refuse her.”

“The group at the podium,” I said, “do they know that Marianne is the one who should speak to Ed?”

“Sure, they know,” Roz said. “The question is can they bring themselves to ask her.”

“Why would they not?”

“Asking puts it in the open, that she and Ken were ‘close.’”

“Uncomfortable for Roy Avalone,” I said.

“A bitter pill for a husband to swallow.” Roz lifted her charcoal eyebrows.

With three raps of a gavel, Del Musselman summoned everyone back to their seats. “Time to start tonight’s program. We have The Jocular Geologist Heinrich Blatt. We have Mina Blatt, star of stage and local television. They are presenting one of our favorites, ‘Picture Jasper.’ Please return to your seats.”

Roz went to find James. Sally and I sat in our same seats as before. Marianne sat beside Sally. She said to Sally, “I need to talk with you.”

“Whenever you like.”

“Lunch tomorrow?”

Sally nodded yes. The program was under way.

A scenic photo of eastern Oregon’s high desert filled a big screen behind Heinrich Blatt. He was a middle-size man with mousy hair, but he wore a full-length lab coat and carried a clipboard. He held a microphone in the other hand. He spoke with an accent that seemed to come and go.

“*Goot* evening, everyone, I am Heinrich Blatt, The Jocular Geologist. Also I am a member of this fine club.

“Long ago, before I became a geologist, I was what you Americans call — a class clown. I was a fidgeter. I could not sit still. Always I was looking for a chance to distract the class and make everyone laugh. With the pulling of the pigtails, the paper airplanes, and, of course, the impolite noises. You know the noise I mean.”

Heinrich turned away with the microphone close to his lips. As he bent slightly, a titanic fart sound rattled the PA system. Heinrich faced the audience, grinning.

“Still hilarious, *ja*? Anyway, to make a long story short, I grew into a man and you can never guess. I married a schoolteacher. Please meet my wife Mina.”

From behind the podium, a beret and then a face in white greasepaint arose and then a pair of compact shoulders — as if a pixie was coming to the surface on an elevator. We saw, as Mina lilted away from the podium, that she wore a white jumper over a black bodysuit and white gloves. A big red apple brooch was pinned near her heart.

“Mina wishes to thank you, too, don’t you, Mina?”

Hands together, Mina nodded primly, left and right.

“As you see, Mina prefers not to speak.”

Mina shook her head devoutly no.

“It is the secret of a blissful marriage, *ja*?” Heinrich gave a hearty laugh.

The audience laughed too, because Heinrich did not see Mina rolling her eyes.

“Well, then. On with the show,” said Heinrich, turning to the screen. “May we see the next slide, Mina?”

While Heinrich’s back was turned, Mina dipped ballerina-fashion to a plié. She grinned, *Watch this!* She launched to a grand jeté, flying like an escaped balloon. She spun, she swooped, she fluttered on tippy-toes around the podium, one arm held above her head in a taunting arc.

She was a bold picador to unknowing Heinrich's bull.

"Mina, next slide?"

Mina thrust her fists to her hips, elbows out. *Slides are boring!*

"Mina?"

Mina shot like seltzer from a bottle to the podium, skidding past the computer but somehow tapping the right button as she whizzed by.

A map flashed onto the screen, Malheur County.

"*Ja, goot.* Tonight we present slides from our vacation in eastern Oregon. Possibly you are thinking, *ach*, pictures from somebody vacation — boring! However, I promise you, it will be quite interesting. Oh. Er, please excuse a moment while I find my laser pointer..."

Heinrich needed three hands, shifting the clipboard under the arm of his microphone hand while he fished in different pockets for the pointer. Heinrich's heavy breathing came over the PA in storm-like gasps, We forgot about Mina for the moment.

"One moment, please." Heinrich transferred the clipboard, clasping it between his knees.

"My laser must be somewhere!"

A paper airplane sailed over the audience, quiet as a U-2 spyplane above frozen Russia..

Aha! Heinrich found the laser pointer. He aimed it at the map on the screen. The red dot danced around Lake Owyhee. We could not help but watch the dancing red dot.

Until a second paper airplane sailed overhead.

Mina was the picture of innocence. Heinrich recited and laser-looped the landmarks of the region, offering notes of geographical interest about each. A third paper airplane took flight.

This time we saw Mina had a flight deck of paper airplanes in a box at the podium. We held our collective breath. Heinrich might turn and catch Mina any second.

“As you see,” Heinrich said, “this region of the Owyhee Mountains is about sixty miles west of Boise. Is something going on back there?”

With eyes wide, Mina froze. Heinrich swung around. “I hear whispering. Possibly giggling. Mina, is anything the matter?”

Mina rattled her head no.

“You are sure?”

She nodded energetically, eyes bulging.

“Well, then,” said Heinrich, turning again to the map. “Our area of special interest is this 15-mile square from Crisman Hill up to Three Fingers Rock. Heh-heh, you can easily imagine what a class clown would make of a name like Three Fingers Rock. Eh, Mina? Everyone can recall from school days, there is a certain three-finger gesture that bad little boys learn to make.”

Heinrich glanced over his shoulder. Mina’s arms were glued to her sides, just in time. She had let fly a squadron, using both hands.

“So then, *ja*, just west of Three Fingers Rock...”

Mina began a dance to sultry rhythms no one else could hear. Her shoulders thrust up and down, one then the other. Her white-gloved hands took flight, flipping the bird in synch with Heinrich’s travelog around Three Fingers Rock. She hoochie-coochied, her knees squared out and elbows pumping.

“You know what’s weird,” I whispered to Sally, “is how we’ve become Mina’s accomplices.”

“You wouldn’t snitch on her?” Sally replied in horror.

“We were innocent bystanders. Or by-sitters. Now we’re in a conspiracy of silence.”

Shush! The command came from behind us. I turned to apologize. It was a middle-aged

man in a plaid shirt, mesmerized by Mina's dance of defiance.

One of the paper airplanes landed in my lap. "Throw me back!" was written across the wings. While Mina danced, someone lofted their paper airplane to the front. So I did the same. A dozen more planes sailed back to Mina, landing and sliding at her feet.

"Mina! What is the meaning of this?"

She froze.

"Mina, my darling, what has happened? Who has done such a thing with so many paper airplanes?"

Mina panned the audience with a blank look. *Who could it be?* Suddenly, inspiration.

"Who is responsible for all this ... disorder?"

Mina's arm shot to her right. She pointed at Del Musselman.

Del sat up in surprise. He shook his head, held up his hands to deny the charge.

"Del Musselman, aren't you ashamed?" Heinrich's voice overflowed with disappointment and reproach. "You of all people."

Heinrich strode past the podium to face Del, who shrank visibly in his seat.

"Del, you have so much potential. Yet you fritter away your time. And our time. The others want to learn about the desolate wastes of eastern Oregon. Del Musselman, you must bring your chair to the front of the class and sit where Mina can keep an eye on you."

Obediently, Del moved his chair to the front and sat, his head hung low. Mina stood by with her hands on his shoulders. She laid her cheek against the bad boy's head.

Heinrich went on to give a mostly straightforward talk about picture jaspers.

At the end, Heinrich and Mina took a bow, and Del took a bow with them. They had a few minutes for questions.

“If I was to go up to Malheur County today...” The question came from Soapy Stovall, die-hard prospector. In his fifties, Soapy was sunburned and all sinew. Seeing him, you’d think of beef jerky wearing a hat. “So if I was to go up to Malheur County, is there any picture jasper left to find?”

“Yes and no,” said Heinrich. “Certainly there are veins not yet discovered and nodules to be dug on existing claims. However, the rules are tighter today and there is cleanup to be done before further mining can proceed. For the casual visitor, the best way to find picture jasper is to visit local rock shops.”

“That’s too dang bad,” Soapy said.

“Exactly the meaning of Malheur in French,” Heinrich said. “Malheur is misfortune, an evil hour. Too dang bad.”

I stood. “What is jasper? I’m new at this.”

“Thank you for asking. A dozen other people want to know but were afraid to ask.”

Mina, hanging on her husband’s arm, tick-tocked her head, back and forth, and made a yak-yak-yak gesture with her white-gloved thumb and fingers.

“Briefly, then...” Heinrich said, noticing Mina’s antics. “Jasper is an umbrella term, like ‘bread.’ There are many recipes. Jasper is silicon dioxide, or silica, with impurities that add color or colors. Jasper is opaque, and the surface is very hard — too hard to scratch with a knife.”

Mina nodded. *Not bad, easy to understand. Not so many words.*

Heinrich could not resist adding, “If you think it’s pretty and someone tells you it’s not agate, it’s probably jasper.”

Geode in hand, a guest asked, “Is this the first time you’ve done this presentation?”

“We’ve done ‘Picture Jasper’ a few times,” Heinrich said.

Mina showed three fingers.

“Is it always Del who has to sit in the chair of despair, or was that just for tonight?”

Mina tippy-toed over to Del, cradling and stroking his beleaguered red beard.

“It’s always Del,” Mina said, shocking more than a few in the audience. “Emotions were running high at the break, so we asked Del about blaming someone else for a change. But Del’s a trouper.”

“I have a question.” Doris Drusenberg, stout and straggly, fifty-year member of RGMS, asked, “What is happening to this club?”

Chapter 6

Ancient Oasis

There are questions you should not ask. “Are you awake” is one. Another is “Do you really like it, or are you just saying that to make me feel good?” A third is “What goes through your mind when we are making love?” Most of the time, with questions like these, the answer is a click. But sometimes there’s a bullet in the chamber.

“Tell the truth” is part of the commitment between Sally and me. We ask a lot of questions. Replies may include an opt-out: “Are you sure you want to know?”

In such moments, I hold Sally’s hands in mine and wrap my legs around her, like a sailor high in the rigging in a heavy sea, and I say, “Yes.”

Or I say, “Mmm, maybe later.”

Telling the truth is hard, and hearing it can be harder, but eventually the discipline becomes a habit, like brushing your teeth properly. And then it’s liberating. You spend more time in the world, with the one you love, and less time in your head at the cognitive control panel.

So, fair warning: if you tell Sally your secrets, odds are you’re telling Romeo too.

Sally and Marianne had lunch at Marianne’s house, a mini ranch in the horsey part of Tarzana. Marianne had a lot on her mind and no one she could talk to. Her troubles grew out of the affair with Ken Tanaka. Here is the story Marianne told Sally — in my own words.

It started at the RGMS annual picnic, the year before last. The picnic was in the park by Lake Balboa, as always. Volunteers arrived early to set up the grill and serving tables. Everyone else arrived fifteen minutes after the official start time, setting up their lawn

chairs in a great circle with polite intervals for sociable circulation. Marianne and Roy picked a spot, unfolded their chairs, and unfurled a blanket for visitors. They had a good view of cormorants lined up on the curb of the lake, elbow to elbow, their wet wings hanging out to dry.

"Cormorants," exclaimed Ken, scissoring his legs and dropping too hard onto the visitors blanket. "They're my favorite. What about you, Roy?"

"Heinrich told me..." Roy laughed at the thought. "He said they look like too many Draculas showed up at your costume party."

"He's funny," said Marianne.

"The whole lake is a wonder," Roy added, "so many species stopping here, in a city with 5 million cars."

"Some birds decide to stay here rather than migrate," said Ken.

Roy nodded. "There's a Night Heron pair on the other side of the lake. Permanent residents."

"Why are 'Dracula' birds your favorite?" Marianne was wearing a peasant blouse and a floral-print skirt that made a big circle when she moved down to the visitors blanket. Her thick black hair was all over the place that day but in a country-lass way that went with a picnic.

Marianne knew Ken from RGMS Board meetings, though they had not said more than hello. Marianne attended Board meetings as Newsletter chair. Ken was vice-president. He was young and relatively new to the club but had won over the Nominating Committee with his enthusiasm. They thought a couple of terms as VP might make him a good successor to the top job.

“I like the way cormorants line up arm in arm,” said Ken, putting his elbows out. ““We’re the Cormorant Club!””

Marianne joined in, putting her elbows out. “We’re the Cormorant Club!”

Elbow to elbow, they chanted a third round.

Marianne turned to Roy, but he was being called away to settle a flare-up between Millie and Coral — about software that Millie wanted Coral to use for Membership receipts. Coral didn’t want to use software.

“Well,” Ken said to Marianne, “you’re doing a great job with the newsletter. I like the member profiles especially.”

“Thank you. All feedback is helpful, if there’s anything that could be better.”

“I like your work in *LA Weekly* too.”

Marianne’s smile dropped open. “You’ve noticed me in *LA Weekly*?”

“I’m a field representative in Councilmember Perez’s office. We follow all local press.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“Your piece on the Northridge Mall — so good. Rich in detail about Valley people.”

“Thank you again,” Marianne said. “I was happy with that one. My editor assigned it as a ‘business is busy’ story, but I managed to get some real life in.”

“The part about that lady hurrying to her car, bags in both hands, eager to get home and show her new things, like Christmas... There was compassion in it, humanity.”

“Retail therapy. It’s sad there’s a name for it.”

There was a pause. Ken studied his hands, which were long and delicately jointed, like a pianist’s.

"Marianne," he said, looking up and fixing on her eyes. "I didn't expect there was going to be an opportunity to talk like this, just the two of us."

Uh-oh. Marianne felt a sudden, crushing sadness. It had been wonderful for these few moments, feeling noticed and admired for the things about herself she thought most worth admiring. Now there was going to be trouble.

Why does happiness have to fizzle?

Marianne was going to have to keep her distance from this man who was giving her what she longed for. Or at least she would have to be careful that Ken understood clearly there could be no question of her being unfaithful to Roy. She felt the heat of shame and anxiety in her face, even though she had done nothing wrong.

"Marianne, you're in my mind every hour of the day. At the workshop, I overheard you telling Linda Pradera you were thinking of cutting your hair short. And I thought, 'No, no, no, Marianne, your beautiful hair.' It caught me by surprise, how much I wanted to touch your hair. Just gently touch your hair, and hold you close to me. Marianne, you're turning a little red."

His eyes were concerned. He shifted up onto his knees. His hands were poised as if to offer a vase of flowers.

"I'm sorry, Ken. This cannot happen."

"I'm making a portrait of you," said Ken, as if he hadn't heard. "I have a sweet block of rhodonite at home. The pink is a little paler than you are this minute."

"No, Ken," Marianne said. "You had better go."

"Marianne."

"It's all right," she said. "I just need a minute to myself."

His hand grazed her ankle as he got to his feet. He said, "Yes, I'll go. It's just: I saw a chance to say what I feel. It hurt you. I'm truly sorry."

Ken put the fingers that had brushed her ankle to his lips. He walked away — away from the great circle of lawn chairs. He did not return to the picnic.

Marianne looked around. No one was watching. Then she wondered: did Ken mean he was going away for now or forever?

Roy stood by a serving table with Millie and Coral. It appeared their dispute was settled for the moment, the hatchets buried like buffalo wings in Lucius Tiber's roasted red pepper dip.

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The display case submitted by Roy Avalone was a class project from Sylvia Street Middle School, where RGMS participated in a STEAM enrichment program. For the display case, students fashioned an oasis as the foreground, using mixed materials. They composed a newspaper page for the back wall. Roy supplied palm tree fossils and prehistoric tools.

Western Mojave Times

6000 BC to 3000 BC Late Edition

Region Turns Dry and Hot

Plants, animals freak as creeks go underground. Grasslands down

to gravel in formerly balmy Palmdale.

LANCASTER, California — After more than 6 million years of cool, wet weather, it stopped raining during the summer months. Streams from the mountains ran dry or became seasonal. Lake Thompson kept getting smaller. It has been a couple of thousand years since anyone saw a mammoth in the area, not to mention the camels and horses that used to roam.

“We’re down to jackrabbits and lizards,” said a trader from the Pinto cultural complex. “I bring obsidian cores and projectile points to Malibu. Our obsidian is the best on the market — from the Coso Volcanic Field, east of the Sierra Nevada. Nowadays the travel is long and hard, because it’s farther between oases.”

In the foreground, the floor of the case presented a model oasis surrounded by glued sand and pebbly granite. A painted stream trickled blue from a rise of ground on the left, pooling in a grove of *Washingtonia filifera*, with fronds made from cut and folded paper. At the insistence of students, a camel skeleton carved lovingly from balsa wood lay at the bottom of the pool. A sign sticking up like a flag on a golf course read: *Camelops hesternus*. Another posted sign disclosed: Animals not to scale. Animals represented variously in ceramics, plastics, and photocopies glued to cardboard included mice, rats, desert cottontail rabbits, gophers, iguanas, snakes, and a smelt.

To the right of the oasis lay a rock cut in half to reveal two fossilized palm roots, one as thick as a cucumber, the other the size of zucchini. Next to the palm roots were three reproductions of Pinto-era tools: a hammerstone, rounded for a good grip; a scraper, with a tapering curved edge; and a spear point, looking like a Christmas tree with two stubby

trunks. A list of participating students was on the right-side wall, above an urgent call: Look Out for Climate Change!

+ + +

Marianne's dread of the next Board meeting grew as the days counted down. She was sure Ken had not left the club. She was unsure whether he would avoid her gaze or be cold or maybe try too hard to act as if nothing at all had passed between them. She pictured herself acting normal when Ken was looking. Her smile ("Old Reliable ") was friendly, but her voice cracked when she imagined having to speak.

In one scenario, which Marianne found troubling, Ken was confident and impeccably discreet in his bearing. This imagined Ken chatted easily to his left and right. He ordered the tuna sandwich on toast because Suzette Sanger was having it, and she always had such good ideas, said the imagined Ken. In fact, he had been buttering up Suzette lately, and Marianne smiled at herself for being jealous. Undeniably, Ken Tanaka was good-looking.

Marianne wore her dangly turquoise earrings to the meeting, like blue lightning bolts against her raven hair.

Roy drove. He dropped Marianne in front of Café Tranquilina, where RGMS Board meetings have been held since the beginning of geologic time.

"Hi, everybody," Marianne said, walking into the banquet room and hanging her purse on her usual chair. Coral, Suzanne, and Del were already seated. Ken had taken a seat toward the far end of the table, which Marianne noted with appreciation and a flicker of disappointment. He said, "Hi, Marianne."

His voice was normal.

Roy called the meeting to order, Lucius Tiber read the minutes of the last meeting — in his inimitable manner, as though dropping red grapes into his mouth at a Roman orgy — and Millie gave the treasurer's report. Old business was dispatched with little discussion. There was only one item of new business: Large-Saw Training for Women, submitted by Ken Tanaka.

Introducing the measure, Ken reminded the Board he was working on the RGMS application for Rock Club of the Year. "We have a great-looking club: field trips, workshops, speakers every month. We're strong in all the traditional categories. Our membership is stable, when other rock clubs have gotten old and gone under. I'm confident we're a contender without our having to do one thing different. However, I want to propose that we start doing one or two new things to make our application stand out."

"Such as what?" said Del Musselman, his read beard whisking the bun of a hamburger on his plate.

"One or two things to show them at the national level that RGMS is looking to the future of the rockhounding hobby. Specifically, we could start a program training women to use the big saws in our workshop. Why? Because two-thirds of our members are women. Only a handful do their own slab cutting.

"It's a simple skill, one hour of hands-on training. If we train two women per month, we'll have 20 percent of RGMS women qualified within a year. No other club comes close to that level of initiative for women members."

"Every new member — man, woman, or junior — already learns how to use the trim saws during orientation," said Suzette. A furrow of irritation divided and tightened her usually

antic brow.

“I don’t mean any criticism whatsoever,” Ken assured her, “We have a great club, especially in the workshop. Big saw training is just a small thing we can add that will mean a lot to a majority of our members, whether or not they choose to take the training.”

Exasperated, pulling at his beard till it was his turn to talk, Del Musselman said, “Women don’t use the big saws for a good reason. It’s because they are unfamiliar with power tools in general. They are afraid of power tools, and it will take more than a one-hour training to remedy that.”

Ken nodded. “You may be right. Let’s start with a couple of women who want to learn. See how it goes.”

“The other problem is,” said Del, “if we train twenty new users, there won’t be enough saws for the people who use them now. Both of our 24-inch saws are booked solid.”

“I remember when women,” said Doris Drusenbergs, whose memory went back to the 1950s, “did little more in this club than bring lunch and serve coffee. I think saw training is a fine idea.”

“Doris, you’re the exception that proves the rule,” said Del. “Nobody could ever stop you from learning to saw, drill, polish, or hammer rock out of a cliff face. They might try to get in your way, but nobody ever stopped Doris Drusenbergs from doing any kind of rockhounding you wanted to do.”

Doris glowed a little. What Del said was true.

“The women we teach to use big saws will be RGMS members for life,” said Roz McCleggy, Librarian. “They may or may not keep cutting slabs, but they will remember being offered the chance.”

"I'm a woman," thundered Coral Finchum, the tallest person in the room, even sitting down. "And I don't want to use big saws. They're oily and loud. And I really, really don't want anybody telling me what I ought to want."

"Order," said Roy, cooling the moment with a gaze into each face around the table. "Let's take breath. I'm thinking of the view from the top of Gem Hill. From there, you see the vastness of the Mojave. There's Castle Butte. The gigantic mineworks at Boron. Kramer Hills, with the biggest jasper formation in the world. At your feet, the town of Lancaster, like the bath tub plug in a prehistoric lake."

Almost everyone in the room was familiar with this panorama. Marianne was not. Nor was Coral. Ken had never climbed the slopes of Gem Hill, because everyone said it was picked clean — like a Zamboni had gone over it.

Roy continued, "The vice-president has proposed starting a training program and then pausing to assess. Would anyone like to comment on that specific proposal, or make a motion?"

Millie Zhang, best on the Board at parliamentary wording on the fly, said: "I move that we adopt a pilot program for Big Saw Training for Women, with the program to be described in writing by Ken Tanaka for approval by the Board before the program begins."

"We have a motion. Is there a second?"

"I move that the motion on the floor," said Suzette Sanger, Workshop chair, "be tabled until it can be shown that there is demand for such a program and that we have enough saws to support the program and new users."

"Suzette, you don't want to even give it a try?" Ed Bailey said.

"What I want," Suzette replied, "is to not have people messing around in my area."

I've run the workshop a long time and done pretty well. The equipment is in good shape, and the people who come to the workshop like it a lot the way it is."

With a second from Del Musselman, the motion to set aside Ken's saw program won by a vote of six to five. Doris voted with Del, breaking the tie.

Roy asked Ken, "Anything further for us tonight?"

Ken seemed unfazed by the defeat. "Looking ahead, I'd like to put together an informal group — to brainstorm new ideas for the club. Ideas might include things like an on-boarding program for new members, online options for paying dues, sustainable jewelry, that sort of thing. If anyone has an interest in these or other ideas, please let me know and we'll get organized."

There were three volunteers for the brainstorming group: Ed Bailey, Millie Zhang, and Marianne Avalone. That was a year and a half ago.

Chapter 7

Fire in the Hole

The view from my office window is a dumpster. Sometimes it's better to look at than the paperwork on my desk. I was reading scratch marks on the side of the dumpster when a motor scooter pulled in. The rider stashed her helmet in a milk carton above the taillight. It was Millie Zhang, RGMS treasurer, human hummingbird.

Millie had an appointment with Uncle Luis, something about the lease on the RGMS workshop building. Uncle Luis was late, so I poured a cup of coffee for us both. She cast her eye upon my two-ton desk, wobbly wire bookcase, and the dog bed.

"Your dog is out of the office today."

"He went with Sally on a run. I can't blame him."

I asked Millie what she thought about Ed Bailey's tirade against Del Musselman at the RGMS meeting. Millie said it was unlikely the Board would remove Del from office.

"The votes are not there," she said, counting them off. "Coral, Suzette, Lucius, Doris, and Soapy will all support Del, and probably Roz."

"Soapy?"

"Soapy Stovall, Ways and Means. Soapy's got the goldbug, goes prospecting. Works in cell tower construction."

"He asked about looking for picture jasper."

"That's him," said Millie. "Anyway, even if there were a majority against Del, Roy would not let it come to a vote."

"Why not?"

“Roy Avalone is a conservationist — first, last, and always. It’s his DNA.”

“Even if Del is a detriment to the club . . .”

“Roy believes in RGMS as a positive force. That’s why he agreed to serve as president.

By educating members, we guide their enthusiasm toward nonpolluting, nondestructive activities. As an organization with more than a hundred active members, we get a voice in government hearings on land use policy. Roy will toil day and night to avoid doing anything that might weaken the club. In his mind, as a conservationist, every good thing that is lost is lost forever.”

I saw her point. “For Roy, the issue is not who is right, Ed or Del. The issue is what’s good for the Reseda Gem and Mineral Society.”

“Exactly. If one faction drives out the other, we are left with half a club.”

Millie and I both turned to the window as a car turned into the tight parking opposite the dumpster. It was Uncle Luis. He climbed out of a Regalo Properties sedan. Hamish trotted behind with the ever-present “just glad to be here” look on his face.

“Millie, *bellissima*,” said Uncle Luis, kissing her cheek. “I apologize for being late. I had to see a lady about a dog.”

Hamish came to me for a head ruffling and settled, paws forward, in the dog bed. If anyone needed a West Highland White Terrier, he was on standby.

“What’s the news?” Uncle Luis said, starting a pot of coffee. He put in a scoop and a half for each cup, plus one and a half for the pot. He liked to say the coffee was strong enough when the spoon could stand in the cup.

“We were just talking about Roy Avalone,” I said, “and the blow-up between Del Musselman and Ed Bailey.”

Uncle Luis winced, showing it pained him to hear of longtime friends falling out. He turned to Millie. "What is going on with those two?"

"The trouble has been brewing quite a while."

"Really? How long?"

Looking up toward the fluorescent light fixture, she said, "It started with the Presidents Day Massacre. You heard about that?"

"Sounds serious."

"It was a turning point — the Board meeting February before last. We were reviewing a draft budget. The draft was basically the same as the previous year's budget, from when Del was president.

"We went around the table. All the committee chairs said their amounts were fine, except Marianne. The printing and postage costs for the newsletter were going up.

"Roy asked for ideas and comments about the budget. Ken jumped right in. It was his first year as vice-president. It was like watching a mountain lion cross the 405 — that's what Ed said later.

"Ken proposed a new line item in the budget for Rock Club of the Year, his main project. He asked for \$1,000.

"The amount got everybody's attention. It was up there with the newsletter, insurance, and storage.

"Del went straight to sarcastic. What was Ken going to spend so much money on, bottles of Dom Perignon for the AFMS judges? Ken laughed, showing he appreciated the joke. He said he was asking for \$1,000 as a commitment. Commitment to what? A commitment to continual improvement — in other words, always looking for ways to make to

make RGMS a better club for members. No matter how good we are, we can always do better, Ken said. His plan was to use the \$1,000 to develop new ideas and offer specific proposals for the Board to consider. Website capabilities, gear for field trips, community outreach — he was open to all ideas that would make RGMS a clear leader among rockhounding organizations.

“Ken had half the room with him. That’s the thing that made Del’s blood boil. Who did Ken think he was? Did he realize everyone in the room knew more about rockhounding than he did? And how to run a rock club?

“Del got so loud Tranquilina stuck her head in to see what was going on. Roy told her everything was all right, and she left. Then, having second thoughts, Tranquilina came right back in. She put her fists on her hips. ‘There will be no fighting in my place. Is that clear?’ We all said it was. Tranquilina never gets angry. It was like being yelled at by St. Francis. ‘If there is trouble, I will inform Luis Regalo. I will not have donkeys braying and kicking in my establishment.’

“Roy promised there would be no trouble.

“Tranquilina said, ‘Very well. Would anyone like dessert?’

“Ken was conciliatory. He could see people around the table wanted to give him their vote, if it could be done without bloodshed.

“Ken gave his assurance that all proposals and all spending decisions would be put before the Board for approval. His role as vice-president would be to gather ideas.

“Del saw the vote could go either way. His face was red as his beard. He just lost it. He pounded the table. ‘How are we going to pay for all this? Where is this extra \$1,000 coming from?’

“Ken said, there were lots of ways to find funding. Del said, ‘Name one.’

“That’s when Ken changed tactics. Did he do it on purpose? Hard to say. For whatever reason, Ken turned and stuck a horn into Del’s ribcage.

“Ken said, ‘We shouldn’t be spending \$2,000 a year on storage. Half of that is rocks with no commercial value. Why not store those rocks in members’ back yards, if they’re worth keeping at all?’

“Del pounded the table with both fists. ‘I will get to those rocks as soon as I can. Someone has to sort them, and right now I don’t have time.’

“Del sat back down, a little surprised to find he was on his feet.

“Ken asked, was Del the only one who could sort the rocks.

“‘Obviously not. Some were collected back in the 1950s.’ Del pounded the table again, this time splatting Coral’s dessert.

“It was a slice of cherry pie. The red, pulpy filling flew across the table.

“Ed Bailey took a blob of cherry goo above one eye. He wiped it with a napkin, shaking his head in disbelief. He said, ‘That’s enough. I move we add the new line item for the vice-president to the budget.’

“The motion carried. And that’s when things really turned sour between Ed Bailey and Del Musselman.”

+ + +

The orange-red pustule of a hot volcano drew passers-by to Del Musselman’s display case. Crumpled plastic-wrap over the cone simulated waves of exhaust emanating from the

cinnamon-brown mountain. Del's volcano was two feet tall, built up in layers of newspaper glued over chicken wire. Gullies cut with a mat knife lent texture to Mt. Musselman. In a genius touch of display case design, Del positioned a floor-to-ceiling sheet of clear plastic-wrap like an extra pane of glass at the front. It was sprinkled with black pepper. It seemed to be snowing volcanic ash inside the display case.

Mt. Musselman was a mature volcano, buried halfway in its own eruptive mess. The surrounding soil and rock were seen in cross-section — dark layers iced with light-colored gooeey ash. Passages meandered underground, like tunnels in an ant farm. In a layer near the base lay a fob-sized agate, sliced open. A sticky-note read: "Shine your phone light left and right to see the fire in Fire Agate."

Off to the side, a placard explained that agates form in cavities when mineral-bearing water trickles in. Silica forms crystals that accumulate as whitish plumes or bands. In Fire Agate, iron oxides add a Schiller effect — a shimmer of color from red to orange and yellow, sometimes even blue.

The "Fire in the Hole" display case was a popular stop. Phones came out, flashlights shone forth, cameras clicked. "Ooh" or "aah," visitors said, and moved on. The Fire Agate in the case was collected by Delbert Musselman in 1974, in his early days as a rockhound.

+ + +

Ken's budget victory was dramatic but proved to be mostly symbolic, Millie said. Ken and his New Ideas discussion group came up with many proposals — for better recordkeeping,

community relations, member retention, and more — only to see them shot down by a slim but immovable majority on the Board.

“They beat us by one vote every time,” said Millie. “You have to give them credit. Del and his allies never missed a meeting.”

“So what did you do?” said Uncle Luis.

“Oh, we kept talking, emailing, working on things. We made the decision to just go ahead with projects that didn’t necessarily need Board approval. Ed Bailey started giving a site history talk on field trips, after the required safety talk. Ed let the the Board know he was making the change. He didn’t ask for their okay. Site history talks didn’t affect any other committees, so there were no objections.”

“So the committees are fiefdoms, with barons running things,” said Uncle Luis. “I guess that makes the king a figurehead. It wasn’t like that when Del was king.”

Millie continued, “Marianne and Linda Pradera started the New Member Guides. Coral squawked at first about Membership being her area, but eventually she didn’t care. They weren’t interfering with dues or the membership list, which is Coral’s crown jewel. It didn’t hurt that Marianne was Mrs. RGMS President.”

“Who’s Linda Pradera?” I asked.

“Registered nurse, single mom. Mother of the star member in our Junior division, Hector Pradera.”

“I met him,” said Uncle Luis. “There’s a young man with a bright future. He could get scholarships from Yale or Cornell.”

“He’s a good kid,” Millie said, “learning everything for the love of learning. I just hope he doesn’t get burnt out from the constant pressure.”

"What pressure?" I asked.

"Parental pressure," Millie said. "Achieve, achieve, achieve."

"You think his mom applies too much pressure?"

"I know it for a fact," said Millie. "She told me he's going into petroleum engineering."

"That's the highest paying field for a geologist," Uncle Luis pointed out.

"Of course," said Millie, "it's classic tiger mom."

"There's nothing wrong with being well paid for work you love to do."

"I agree. In fact, I wish I was well paid for work I love to do," Millie said. "But petroleum is no place for a gifted kid nowadays. We've got climate change to deal with."

Uncle Luis sighed. "The times we live in."

"What kind of work are you in?" I asked.

"I work in Traffic Algorithms for Gaggle."

"I thought Gaggle people all loved their jobs."

"That is true, they do. I would never leave Gaggle," Millie said. "But if I were independently wealthy, I wouldn't need a job. I would spend all my time on Opal Mountain cracking rocks."

"It's a choice," Uncle Luis said, "always a choice."

"That's what I mean about Hector," Millie said. "The whole point of being American is you get to choose for yourself."

Chapter 8

It's All Quartz

From hundreds of millions of miles away, gravity pulls the farthest planets toward the Sun. Gravity keeps things other than birthday balloons from floating off Earth. Yet gravity is weak as Prohibition whiskey, physicists say, compared to a force they call — [drum roll] — the strong force. The strong force holds the nucleus of an atom together.

Oxygen is oxygen thanks to the strong force, holding on tight to its eight protons and eight neutrons. Silicon is silicon because fourteen protons and fourteen neutrons are seated as strictly as a Thanksgiving table,

When a silicon atom meets two atoms of oxygen, their electrons get involved. The electrons interlock, and the three atoms combine to form one atom of silica, SiO_2 . What tells these three atoms they should get together? What keeps them from falling apart, even if they are a good fit? There is yet another force in play, the electromagnetic force.

Electrons are attracted to the positive charge of protons. Electrons fly around the huddled nucleus of protons and neutrons like a moth around a flame. Electrons, however, are flighty and apt to abscond if brighter protons come into view. The passions of electrons make strange atomic bedfellows.

"I hate my job so much."

Sally jammed her purse into its usual slot in the antique secretary by the door. It was a favorite purse, clad in wool with bands of color like a Navajo blanket. I waited for Sally to go upstairs and change into not-work clothes. When she came down, at least some of the steam had blown off, and it was safe to sit beside her.

“Tell me about it.”

“I don’t even know where to begin. What makes people — and I mean Gloriana — such jerks?”

“What did she do?”

“She wants to run a Healthcare commercial during the Super Bowl.”

“Super Bowl? That’s big time.”

“Yes. The biggest national advertising you can buy.”

“But clearly not a good idea.”

“Not for us. It’s a one-off. It’s a national audience, but we only write business on the West Coast.”

“I see.”

“And it devours half my budget.”

“Is the Super Bowl a done deal or still a dream of Gloriana?”

“It’s not final.”

Sally un-tensed her shoulders, falling back on the sofa cushions. “I keep wondering — why, why, why does she come up with things like this? Where do these idiotic impulses come from?”

“I believe they emanate from the strong force.”

“What?”

“Idiotic, self-centered impulses are due to the strong force.”

“Which is . . .”

“In a corporate setting, the strong force is executive ego.”

“Have you been drinking?”

“Just musing.”

“Then you had better fix me a drink. Make it bourbon and spring water,” Sally said.

“With bitters. Extra bitters.”

I mixed two and dropped a cherry in Sally’s.

Noticing, she smiled. We relaxed, letting electromagnetic charges in the alcohol do their work. I asked idly, “Do you think Del might have pushed Ken Tanaka down that hill?”

Sally considered, holding her drink up to look at the cherry through the lens of the bottom of the glass.

“He had the motive and the opportunity.”

“Mule Canyon provided the means,” I said, “the steep slope and jagged rocks.”

“But murder seems out of proportion to the context. You don’t kill somebody over control of a rock club, do you?” After a pause, she added, “Or it might have been fisticuffs that got out of hand.”

“I haven’t heard ‘fisticuffs’ in decades,” I said. “Even then it was in a movie.”

“I am a deep mine, filled with unexpected treasures.”

“And a trove of electromagnetic forces.”

“What’s with you and the forces?”

“I’m thinking about bonds that hold an organization together. Weak, strong, interlocking.”

“You know the force that holds you and me together,” Sally posited.

“Which force is that?”

“It is the strongest force of all — fatal attraction.”

“Fatal like fate?”

“Fatal like if you get tired of me I kill you.”

+ + +

If quartz were a corporation, Millie Zhang’s display case could have been its org chart — in 3-D.

A hexagonal tower of clear plastic panels stood at the center like a headquarters building. The tower peaked in a hexagonal pyramid. A name tag read:

Hello, I’m

Quartz

SiO₂, crystals visible to the naked eye

Behind the quartz tower, the back wall of the display case was pale blue with scattered cotton-ball clouds. The floor was a fine-napped textile in grass green. Paths of narrow tape, like sidewalks, connected to satellite structures in this scale model of a corporate park.

There were five subsidiaries around Quartz HQ.

To the left, near the back wall, an amethyst nodule, sliced open, looked like a concert band shell stained purple. The musicians were big crystals, the size of baby teeth.

Hello, I’m

Amethyst

quartz with purple (iron oxide) crystals

In the left foreground, Opal was represented by a bowl of tiny white beads. Crystals in opal are cryptocrystalline, too small to see under a microscope. Opal crystals incorporate water molecules, giving the gem its pearlescent flash.

Hello, I'm

Opal

cryptocrystalline hydrated quartz

A sidewalk to the right led to a cluster of ping pong balls, representing Chalcedony (kal-Said-unny). Chalcedony crystals are too small to see but may amass in translucent or whitish globs, like a bunch of pale grapes. The gemologist's term for this bunching form is botryoidal. If you think of a singing cowboy as "Autry-oidal," you are ready to pronounce botryoidal correctly.

Hello, I'm

Chalcedony

microcrystalline or cryptocrystalline quartz

Two subsidiaries of chalcedony were paired in the right foreground: Jasper and Agate. The sidewalk from Chalcedony to Jasper led to a Potato-Head figure dressed in paisley.

Hello, I'm

Jasper

**opaque chalcedony with red to yellow or brown color,
or jumbled colors**

The sidewalk to Agate came to a stained-glass window. Layers of alternating color — white, black, blue, yellow, and red — illustrated banding in agate. Comma-shaped swirls illustrated plume, whitish to translucent.

Hello, I'm

Agate

chalcedony with features such as banding, plume, or "moss," often translucent

Millie created her agate window from a beginner's stained-glass kit she bought at a hobby store.

+ + +

Marianne stepped off the cliff of marital fidelity with a simple "I changed my mind." It happened after a meeting of the New Ideas discussion group at Ken's apartment. Linda, Ed, Millie, and Marianne sat around the kitchen table while Ken saw to the sparkling water, tea, diet cola, and coffee. The furniture and drapes in Ken's apartment seemed not of anyone's choosing. The radio was tuned to the college station.

The meeting began with a free-for-all listing of ideas. Millie wanted software instead of clipboards and three-ring binders. Marianne and Linda wanted to help new members connect socially and integrate into the club. They made a list of people who might volunteer as greeters

and guides. Ed was there to listen, though he wouldn't mind if at some point they explored the possibility of walkie-talkies for field trips.

The meeting ended when Linda had to pick up Hector from violin practice. Millie, Ed, and Marianne thanked Ken and shuffled out as a group. The concrete silo of the stairwell filled with echoes of their footfalls and chatter. The three said goodbyes and went their separate ways. Marianne felt a tide of resolve rush in and at once rush out again. It left her shivering.

Marianne unlocked her car, pulled the door open, and stared at the empty seat. She pictured herself getting in and driving off, while she stood there watching her other self go home. Marianne was surprised to find she was walking back to Ken's apartment. On the stairs, she asked questions — *what am I getting into? Can this really be happening right now?* She kept walking, not knowing answers.

When Ken opened the door, his face lit with gladness. She said, "I changed my mind."

"Let's go for a walk," Ken said. "There's something I want to show you."

Up the street, they came to a park that filled a city block. Children in white tee shirts and blue gym shorts were doing calisthenics. Old women at the bus stop and boys with skateboards watched Marianne and Ken go by. Police cars slipped like torpedoes from the West Valley station.

"That's where I work," Ken said, pointing to a flat-roofed vision of the future from the 1960s. It was a one-story square of concrete with pastel trim. Slot windows high up let light in. The name of Councilmember Ernesto Perez was the most readable part of the sign in front.

"This way," said Ken, taking Marianne's hand, leading her on a walkway, between the police station and the municipal offices, to a branch library. They sat on a bench built into the library wall, surrounded by landscape plants. "This is where I come after lunch. I reread your

articles. I daydream about us.”

It was a quiet place, a mini garden.

The library’s electric doors slid open. Half a dozen men and women of retirement age filed out, chattering about *Make Mine Murder*, next month’s title for the Mystery Book Club. A woman in cat’s-eye glasses, her iron gray hair pulled back, gave Marianne a knowing sidelong look.

“This is all so strange,” Marianne said, “like we don’t belong here, among regular people. Any second someone might point at us and have us arrested.”

“It’s strange to me too. Like riding in a balloon.”

“I’ve never been in a balloon.”

“Me neither.”

“I’m afraid of what’s going to happen.”

“That’s why we’ve come here — for this quiet moment, no walls. Deciding what to do.”

“What do you see happening?”

“Don’t laugh. I foresee a Great Love.”

“Sorry,” Marianne laughed. “Can’t help it.”

“Marianne.” Ken took both her hands in his. She realized her hands were cold by the from-the-oven warmth of his. “I want you like I want my next breath of air.”

“Ken, I’m not like that, a romantic.”

“Tell me what you feel.”

“What I feel — this is going to sound small and selfish.”

“Tell me. Let me be the one you can tell anything to.”

“What I want, really...” Marianne struggled to push it out. “I want someone who thinks

I'm wonderful."

"That's me, no doubt. I think you're the best writer in town. And I read them all."

Marianne laughed again, this time not a nervous laugh. "Who's the second best writer in town?"

"Later. We can get into that."

"All right. How do you picture us in this Great Love?"

"We live to the utmost, in every hour we have together. We're careful, but we can't help glowing. People we pass on the street will feel refreshed, as if they just woke from hypnosis. Drivers on Vanowen, including bus drivers, will find they are unable to hold back an urge to sing. Sadly, a minute or two later, a quarter-mile down the road, the song-energy fades, and they wonder why they feel bereft. You and I, sweet Marianne, are about to form the nucleus of a large, pulsating, and scientifically unexplainable joy bubble."

Chapter 9

Space, 1876

What I love about the desert is how primary it is. There are no distractions. Everything is important. In the desert, you can remember your name. But you might as well forget your name. In the desert, what matters is your species. A human being in the desert is never more than one or two bad breaks from vanishing utterly.

"I always start a field trip with one question," Ed Bailey said to the clump of city dwellers gathered round. "What is the most likely way one of us will get hurt today?"

He waited for an answer.

We had risen before dawn, driven a hundred miles, and assembled at the base of a brown hill 300 feet high and pocked with snake holes. We were eager to start looking for fossilized roots of palm trees, and a little concerned about finding rattlers instead.

No one else was speaking up, so I volunteered, "Snake bite."

"This time of year, with the weather warming, you should be on the lookout for snakes. Go slowly, and don't put your hand or your foot anywhere you can't see. But snakes are not a big problem. There are at least two hazards more likely to cause trouble today for newcomers in the desert."

"Heat exhaustion," said Millie Zhang, ready to start looking for palm fossils.

"Heat exhaustion is number one. It sneaks up on you," Ed Bailey said with an accusing glare into each face. "Heat exhaustion and heat stroke. Heat stroke is when your body is in crisis and can't even sweat anymore. It's a code blue emergency in the hospital. Take note: we are 35 miles from the nearest ER. So what are we going to do?"

"Half a cup of water every half hour," Millie sang out.

"That's right. And?"

"And make sure the people with you do the same."

"That's what I like to hear," Ed said. "Drink half a cup of water every half hour. Keep sweating. Keep an eye on the people around you."

"What about a broken arm or leg?" a grandmother asked, holding a wriggling 10-year-old by the hand like a fish on a line.

"Injuries do happen. You might twist an ankle or lose your footing, especially on the hillside. Eye injuries happen. Chips fly when people whack rocks with hammers. Take a moment to think ahead, and know what you're going to do if someone is injured:

- Check breathing
- Control bleeding
- Stabilize the injury site
- Get to the hospital.

Better yet, be thinking all the time about how to prevent an injury."

"Keep your thinker-brain turned on," proclaimed the 10-year-old, motionless for a moment.

"Thinker-brains on!" agreed Ed Bailey.

Ending the safety talk, Ed called the roll from the sign-in sheet. He would call it again before we left the site.

"We'll move to the next location around ten o'clock. Get back here when you hear four horn honks from the truck. Till then, have fun. Look at everything. Be selective. If some of you would like help getting started, follow me."

Sally and I and about half the group followed Ed. He took long, slow steps up the slope of Brown Butte, his boots creaking like saddle leather. We came to a shallow gully, just wide enough to walk in. A gully, Ed explained, collects water and loose rocks during the rainy season. "Look at the rocks. See their sameness, in detail," he said. "Be on the lookout for the rock that's a little different."

An already broken rock offers a preview of what's inside, Ed noted. A rock with a stripe of lighter or darker color might be worth breaking open. "If you see one or more dots or circles, they could be palm root. Check the other end of the rock to see if the feature runs all the way through. Wear glasses, and chip the rock strategically. You want a good view inside with the least amount of damage."

Brown Butte was an active volcano a few million years ago. Silica-rich ooze pushed up through the granite floor. Most of the volcanic material cooled into the feldspar grains and rhyolite we were walking on. A lot of silica-rich material came out as ash, cooling into superfine, lightweight tuff. Layers of ash were buried by later eruptions and squished by the weight of further layers above. The mountain was shot through with plugs, pods, and dikes of quartz, which never made it to the surface but cooled more slowly underground and formed large crystals. About a third of the rock and soil had grains and crystals large enough to see.

"Silica, water, and the right combination of pressure and temperature — these are the conditions that form agate and jasper," Ed said. "As you progress up the hill, if you find something interesting, try a wider search at the same elevation. You may have crossed an interesting layer."

Turning his gaze farther uphill, Ed pointed to a scar across the slope. A shelf of

exposed rock extended ten feet or so.

“The L shape of that rock face was cut with tools. That means somebody thought that particular spot was worth a lot of effort. The rubble they left might be worth sifting through. Miners are notorious for the mess they leave behind.”

+ + +

Space Exploration, 1876:

Southern Pacific Railroad Crosses the Mojave Desert

Like a ladybug crossing a dish of ice cream, the prospector in a red shirt and slouch hat caught your eye in Ed Bailey’s display case. The prospector was a toy, like tin soldiers from centuries ago, cast in metal and painted in detail down to his creased boots and black-dot eyes. Trailing him, a donkey carried the luggage at a pace he could keep to for hours, day after day. A hand-lettered caption read: 100 lbs, 3 mph.

A model-train track crossed the display case from Mojave in the west to Barstow and beyond in the east. A vintage locomotive pulling cars loaded with ore had this caption: 1 million lbs, 25 mph.

From Mojave, the tracks ran north (“To Tehachapi”) and south to Ravenna, near Acton, where a timber-framed tunnel bore the caption: Governor Gold Mine, richest gold mine in Southern California.

Halfway between Mojave and Barstow, a northward rail line from Kramer Junction led to a timber-framed tunnel near Randsburg: Rand Silver Mine, richest in California.

Just west of Kramer Junction, a neatly poured length of baking soda edged the highway like a mini mountain range. The caption read: U.S. Borax (Rio Tinto), largest and richest borate mine in the world.

Near Barstow, the humbler Calico Mountains bore the caption: Ever hopeful silver mining from 1870s to 1890s. Hand-lettering with a fresh pen noted the entrance to Mule Canyon.

Ed Bailey's panorama of the conquest of historic space included two features from the future. Southeast of Kramer Junction, there was a replica in pebbles of the ruins of Llano del Rio, sometimes called the Socialist Stonehenge.

Between Llano and the Governor Gold Mine lay the Rogers lakebed, a landing strip at Edwards Air Force Base for the X-15. High above the lakebed, in a night sky at the top of the display case, hung a model of the X-15 rocket-powered airplane. The caption read: 200 lbs, 4520 mph.

+ + +

After nearly an hour of turning over rocks and finding nothing as interesting as a rock that floats, I had another swig of water and surveyed our fellow field trippers, scattered up and down Brown Butte. Some paced slowly back and forth, zigging, then zagging, their heads down. Others, Sally among them, huddled for ages over a square meter of ground, like census takers doing interviews with every rock in sight.

"Sally, I'm going to talk with Ed."

Sally nodded and waved.

"Don't forget to hydrate."

Sally nodded again, examining a nugget as if it might be the biggest find since Sutter's Mill — you just couldn't be sure until you looked.

Ed Bailey was leaning against the hood of his pickup, possibly easing a sore back, definitely keeping an eye on the smallish figures roving Brown Butte.

"Who's that?" I asked, pointing to a pumpkin with legs nearing the top of the butte.

"That's Lucius Tiber," Ed said, "RGMS secretary."

"He's really getting up there."

Ed chuckled. "He always does."

"You're not worried?"

"Fat men are often strong. A few are nimble," Ed said. "Lucius has been up and down Brown Butte many times."

"That's interesting."

"Ask him about any kind of food. Lucius talks like a gourmet about every brand of potato chip."

"I love potato chips. Of course, we haven't had a bag in the house in years."

"They're still real good," Ed said, with a testimonial clap to his belly.

An amiable silence passed.

"You said heat exhaustion was the number one hazard in the desert. What's number two?"

"Disappearing."

"You mean — poof, gone without a trace?"

"It happens more often than you'd think. People come out here, want to look around,

lose track of time, take a wrong turn..."

"That's incredible."

"I'm with Sheriff's Search and Rescue. We pull hikers out of all kinds of terrain.

There's not much we can do if no one knows where they went."

"I was talking with Roz McCleggy the other night. She told me about Ken Tanaka.

What happened to him?"

"That Roz," Ed said. He might have been counting silently to ten. "Ken fell from a cliff in Mule Canyon. That's in the Calico Mountains, about 80 miles east of here. Ken died in the ambulance, internal bleeding. He was a young man. He had a lot still to offer."

"Ken's memory meant a lot to you. That was quite a blowup at the meeting the other night."

"At the meeting, I said what I needed to say. It made a few people unhappy."

"Was anyone with Ken when the accident happened? Roz said Ken knew how to take care of himself."

"One wrong step is all it takes, in certain conditions."

"Was Del Musselman there when Ken fell?"

Ed turned to me, taking a long second look.

"I heard about the Presidents Day Massacre," I said.

"Del was a hundred feet away when it happened."

"Was anyone near Ken when he fell?"

"The coroner found the manner of death was accident. There was no evidence of anything else."

"Did anyone see Ken lose his footing?"

"Suzette Sanger was talking with Ken a little before. She heard his boots scrambling. He cried out."

"Did he call for help, call anyone's name?"

"Suzette said it was surprise and fear, no recognizable words."

"I appreciate your being open about the details."

"Are you an insurance investigator?"

"No, just a new member of the club, wanting to understand what's going on."

"Are you a lawyer? Do you represent the family?"

"I work for my uncle, Luis Regalo."

Uncle Luis's name satisfied Ed my intentions were honorable. He took a drink from a water bottle and told me about Ken.

"Ken Tanaka was like your uncle in a way. He was more interested in the club than in the rocks. Ken had a gift for rock carving, but his focus was on RGMS — its past, its future, its health. He thought of the club as a living thing. RGMS was in a declining phase, according to Ken, with a bad case of grumpy old man syndrome. He was looking for ways to revitalize the club. That did not go down well with the grumpy old men.

"Ken was still new to the club when he asked to ride along with me scouting field trips. I'm always glad of some company. Ken was a good listener about local geography and geology. And there were subjects he knew a lot about, like Llano del Rio, the socialist commune from 1914.

"We were driving back from Victorville when he saw the pillars and chimneys on the north side of the road. We pulled over and took a walking tour of the ruins. He found the canal that brought water from the mountains. We traced the foundation of the main

building, which they called a hotel — for visitors and future residents. There were two huge fireplaces, made of cobblestones hauled from the mountains. The colonists would gather in the hotel after a long day’s work. They had dances, speakers, community sing-alongs. Those two fireplaces must have been a great comfort in winter.

“The Llano del Rio colonists planted gardens and orchards, grew alfalfa as a cash crop, and started a dairy. Ken found the concrete outline of the silo, and he was seeing it as it was in its heyday. He found where the barn must have been. ‘They had horses and mules, right here,’ he told me. ‘Can you believe it? They even had a baseball team!’

“One more thing they had at Llano del Rio was factions, known as the Establishment and the Sagebrush Gang. The Sagebrush faction was mostly hecklers, spreading rumors to undermine the leadership. It’s possible they were in cahoots with outsiders who wanted the colony to fail. Ken took a more universal view. He said, ‘The leadership failed to integrate the dissidents into the organization.’”

Ed interrupted his story. He blew two short blasts on a referee whistle, waving to get Lucius Tiber’s attention. Ed pointed at the 10-year-old, halfway up the slope and moving toward the south side. Lucius signaled he would keep track of the young explorer.

“Ryan Barger’s a handful,” Ed remarked. “Anyway, later that year the RGMS Nominating Committee was looking for someone for vice-president. I recommended Ken Tanaka. I said he was young, enthusiastic, and full of new ideas that could benefit the club. I guess they didn’t hear that last part.”

“RGMS broke into factions after Ken became vice-president?”

“Ken would have said there were tensions before he arrived. The Establishment was well into the grumpy old man phase.”

“Was that an accurate assessment, would you say?”

“Without a doubt. The old guard’s been there twenty years. Del, Coral, Suzette, Soapy, Doris. Me. Others in the general membership.”

“Who were the dissidents?”

“Dissidents are people on the front-line who see a better way — that’s how Ken would put it. Millie Zhang, for example. She saw we could make our bookkeeping more accurate and easy to maintain by using a spreadsheet. That made her a dissident.”

“Marianne Avalone?”

“Sure. She and Linda Pradera wanted to make the club more responsive to newcomers.”

“When did you find out about Ken and Marianne?”

The epoxy dried in Ed’s facial expression. “What about Ken and Marianne?”

“Did you know they were having an affair?”

“There was talk. I don’t know whether there was an affair.”

“A gentleman’s answer to an ungentlemanly question. Thank you, Ed. My mother would be ashamed of my having asked. Can I ask one more question?”

“You can ask.”

“Why was it so personal with Del, the hostility toward Ken?”

“Just cussedness. Del wanted no new toppings on his pizza.”

“The Board meets next Thursday. You’re still determined. Either he goes or you go.”

“That’s the way it is. I have no desire to be part of Custer’s last stand.” Ed looked me in the eye. “Ken Tanaka’s death was a tragedy, and probably the beginning of the end for RGMS. I would appreciate your not repeating that part to your uncle.”

“He won’t hear it from me,” I promised.

Commented [k1]:

Chapter 10

Toothless Saws

Like a giraffe on roller skates, Suzette Sanger lunged from one place to the next with crazy grace. Her arms led and her legs scrambled after as she pushed open the double doors of the RGMS workshop — exactly at nine on Saturday morning. The crowd of rockhounds waiting outside then followed her in, forming a line to receive identification badges. The badges were stored in two shoeboxes on a table at the entrance. The badges certified the wearer had received an orientation and training on machines in the workshop. Badges were surrendered on departure.

Suzette's face was simple and pleasant. She wore no makeup. Dark hair was her most emphatic feature, curling to a scroll below the ear. She had trouble remembering people's names.

Suzette taught Workshop 101. Sally took the class with four other new members, following Suzette from station to station, learning about trim saws, grinding and polishing machines, and workshop safety. The trainees smiled and nodded a lot, Sally said, because it was hard to hear over the din of the machines. Most of the instruction was demonstrated.

Making a pendant began with choosing a slab from the "Training Only!!!" bin. The slabs were miscellaneous jaspers, with the thickness of a pancake and about half the diameter. Using permanent marker, the trainees drew an oval or whatever shape they liked onto their slab and cut it out on a trim saw. Trim saws had a tabletop and a built-in circular

blade, about the size of a coaster. The blade had no teeth. As Mike Banks explained it to me, "It works like a high-speed nail file."

Goggles on, using both hands, Suzette guided a slab into the spinning blade. The slab sang on contact, and Suzette kept pushing until the singing stopped and the slab came apart in two pieces. She made two more cuts to complete a triangle.

Each trainee cut out a shape under Suzette's supervision. It was scary at first, Sally reported, pushing the slab forward and seeing the blade ripping rock between your thumbs, but you got used to it.

"The saw likes to cut straight lines," Suzette said.

The trainees tipped their heads and squinted.

"The saw likes to cut straight lines!" Suzette repeated. She held up a slab marked with an oval. She turned the slab to show the reverse side, where the oval was enclosed in six straight lines. "Cut straight lines," Suzette exhorted, "Then use a grinding wheel to smooth off the corners. Presto, an oval."

The visual aid was one of several fashioned by Mike Banks. Visual aids work better than screaming, he told me. It was a tip that came to him as a drill sergeant at Fort Ord.

Suzette led her charges to the dop pot. In lapidary, a dop is a dowel with a dab of hot wax on the end. Your newly cut-out shape (oval or whatever else you chose) is pressed onto the gooey end of the dop, which then serves as a handle for applying the stone to grinding and polishing wheels, Suzette explained.

"The dop stick gives you better control than holding with your fingers. Also, you're less likely to overdo one side because of being right-handed. Or left-handed, if that's your thing."

Sally and the other new members nodded and smiled.

The training had to pause while Suzette attended to a situation at the entrance. She hurried to the badge-control table, cantering on chopstick legs.

“There she goes,” said Mike Banks. “Nobody gets in without St. Peter’s blessing.”

Mike was at a shop table with me and one other carving student, Akira Saito. Akira was a petroleum engineer, on medical leave after a platform fire in the Baltic Sea. He came to Southern California to recuperate, living with a favorite cousin’s family. Akira was over forty, but it was hard to guess how much. His face was weathered and wadded with wrinkles. He walked with a grimace, tightening when his left leg had to take the weight of a next step. Akira was generally quiet, and deferential to a fault, except when pressed into conversation. Then he became loud, swaggering, and hard to understand. He learned to speak English in Glasgow.

The first session of the carving class was about learning to handle the dentist’s drill — rotary tool, as lapidaries call it. The tools were checked out from the workshop’s equipment locker. Following Mike’s example, Akira and I were each cutting a decorative border of S shapes around a slab of howlite. Sponging the stone with water to keep dust down, we cut an arc, turned the slab, cut another arc, and so on.

“What’s going on at the door?” I asked.

A woman with electric-shock hair and a calypso shirt was silhouetted in the door. A flat hand propped on her side-thrust hip proclaimed she was Not a Happy Customer. Suzette did not, however, play the Cringing Store Manager. Her body language said Maestra of the Symphony. Suzette threw a fist and pointing finger toward distant tympani. She raised her arms to heaven, summoning an angel choir.

“Somebody’s badge is not in the box,” said Mike, narrating a silent movie.

You must have a badge to enter the workshop.

I have a badge, as you well know.

Your badge is not in the box.

Then you must have lost my badge.

I never lose a badge. I have the box. This box is the storehouse of badges.

I gave you my badge, and now you can't find it.

That's because your badge is not in the box.

Because you lost my badge!

I never lose a badge! I have...

Suzette seized a clipboard. She flipped back several pages. Mike continued.

Aha, three weeks ago!

Three weeks ago, I gave you my badge. Right here.

Then your badge should be in the box.

You lost my badge.

I never lose a badge.

I put my badge in your hand at this very table.

I wasn't here that day. I was visiting my aunt in Visalia.

The argument stopped as if by the push of a button. Suzette sat down behind the table and began writing furiously. Mike said she was filling out a day-pass.

"It takes all kinds, eh?" I said to Akira, making conversation.

"Aff," said Akira, "she's a roaster, that 'un."

"A roaster?" I said. I had to stop carving. "Like a chicken?"

"Nae like a chicken," Akira said, agog at my inability to understand plain English. "A

roaster. She's one fer cookin' yer bawbag."

"Oh," I said.

"Her bum's oot the windae is all. Ye ken?"

"You're saying she's 'out there.' Way out there. I ken."

"Do ye aye?"

"Almost," I said. "Like halfway. Or so, you know."

"Anyway. T'other gi' her a square go."

"Aye, very square. Quadrilateral. Perpendicular all around."

Akira gave me a friendly push on the shoulder. "Git on wi' ye."

"It's strange," I said to Mike, "having badges in a group where everyone's on a first-name basis. Is it an insurance requirement?"

"I don't know about that. I know some people like handing out badges," Mike said. "I was a supply sergeant in Frankfurt for three years."

"Suzette is a control freak."

"The original control freak. Anything happens in her territory, she needs to have the say-so. A couple months back, I saw a teenage girl in tears at that door. Suzette bawled her out, up and down, for wearing flipflops to the workshop. 'No open-toed shoes, that's the rule.' And then, 'Wrong shoes, you lose.' Her father was parking the car. He came in, found the girl sobbing. He didn't know what was going on. Suzette laid into him too. 'No open-toed shoes. That is the rule.' The father looked at Suzette like she busted out of Camarillo. He put his arm around the girl, and away they went. We'll never see the two of them again, of that I am sure."

"That's a shame."

“Mind you, I have yelled at a few teenagers in my time. I made some of them cry. But here, surely, we could have found that girl a pair of shoes for the day. It’s ironic.”

“Because you used to be a drill sergeant.”

“Because Suzette is the most beloved member of our club. RGMS gets a ton of credit for having her in charge of the workshop. She’s good at being the spokesperson — a little loopy but likable. Suzette Sanger is an RGMS icon. Too bad she wasn’t blessed with a little more heart.”

+ + +

On the back wall of “Toothless Saws,” submitted by Suzette Sanger, hung two circular saw blades. Under the blade with teeth, the caption read: “Steel teeth, for biting through wood, metal, etc.” The other blade had no teeth but was not perfectly smooth. Its edge was rimmed with crystals, like a margarita. The caption read: “Diamond grit, sanding its way through stone.”

Rock saws do not cut off fingers or thumbs. However, it’s still important to keep safety in mind and wear eye protection. Rock saws throw chips.

A sidebar by the circular saw blades posed this question:

You have a rough rock.

Should you cut side to side

or front to back?

Three good-sized rocks lay on the floor of the display case as examples. They all had two perpendicular cuts, offering views from adjacent sides, like windows of a candy shop on the corner.

Rock 1 was a nodule with fossilized palm root. The first cut revealed the roots end-on, a scattering of dark circles in the light-colored host rock. The adjacent cut showed the roots lengthwise. The dark stripes were mostly straight but not pencil-straight. The roots had pushed with effort through soil over time, slowing and thickening or turning smartly aside in their search for water.

A note beside Rock 1 advised: "Check opposite sides of rough rock to see if features run all the way through."

Rock 2 was a dendritic agate, with branching features. In one view, the dendrites were like sprigs of juniper and fern, ghostly forms in a foggy night. In the adjacent cut, the view of the "forest" was as if from underground, looking "up." The resemblance to branches and leaves was gone. Instead there were blobs and streaks.

A note beside Rock 2 read: "Agates are like clouds, and may look different from different sides."

Rock 3 was labradorite, famous for iridescence. Its "flash" is strictly directional, appearing only when incoming light strikes the mineral layers at certain angles. On Rock 3, arrows marked "flash points," where bits of mineral showed through the crust. A recommended first cut was marked, rather than sawed, with a thin line of blue tape. The adjacent cut revealed that labradorite — at any angle other than a right one — was a mottled mass of bluish gray.

A note beside Rock 3 read: "Find visible flashpoints and align with them when

cutting labradorite.”

A Buddha carved in British Columbian jade sat by a pond of serenely blue labradorite. A motto above the pond in a border of lotus flowers read:

*Fear not the teeth,
fear the tigress.*

+ + +

Lunch was at Ha-joon’s Burgerport, a diner with vinyl booths and a view of the runway — walking distance from the RGMS workshop. Sally and I sat opposite Roz and James McCleggy, watching a DHC-3 Otter taxi for takeoff. The bush plane was one of two belonging to MegaLith Mining, a tenant in Uncle Luis’s hangar.

“Where’s it going?” James wanted to know. James was in his sixties or so. His head was all skull, with a horseshoe of white hair buzz-cut around a bald pate, and shrunken hollows below high cheekbones. In conversation, he thrust his chin forward and squinted, as though trying to focus. “A plane like that could land anywhere.”

“They usually fly to the eastern Mojave. MegaLith has a big calcite mine down the hill from Big Bear. They have sites all over.”

“I’d love to ride along sometime.” James slid on his elbows toward me. “Is that possible?”

“I can ask. In general, miners are not enthusiastic about visits from non-miners.”

James nodded.

Roz jumped in. "You might have told me you were Luis Regalo's nephew."

"Sorry, didn't think about it."

"He's important to the club. I wouldn't want to be seen as talking out of turn."

"No problem. I'm not representing Uncle Luis."

"A little talking out of turn can be interesting."

"A toast to talking out of turn," said James, raising his glass. Sally and I and Roz and James clinked — mineral water, Irish Breakfast Tea (yes, at lunch, iced), diet cola, and guava juice with Cayenne flakes, respectively.

Ha-joon says he gets a lot of squirrely drink orders. A small airport puts strange ideas into people's heads.

I turned to Roz. "So you wanted to talk about the Board meeting. Who's out, Ed Bailey or Del Musselman?"

James grinned, leaning forward again. "It did not turn out as expected,"

Roz rolled her eyes under charcoal-sketch brows. She turned in her seat, the better to follow James' retelling.

"Don't leave anything out," she said, "not a morsel."

"We went to the meeting. Roz is on the Board. I was there as an observer — a reporter, you might say. Several members came to observe — Linda Pradera, Will Meyer, that Shane Grandville person... Can that be his real name, I wonder?"

"Don't get distracted, dear."

"Margot Arrete was there. Voice like a car horn."

"This is off the record, Romeo — right?"

I nodded to Roz, off the record.

“Usually, nobody comes to Board meetings,” she said.

“Was Marianne there?” Sally asked.

Roz nodded significantly.

Here is how James told the story, more or less.

The mood in the room was grave — everyone afraid of saying the wrong thing, setting off a brawl. Except Roy, he was cool as cucumber sandwiches. He chatted with Ed about back roads and then with Del about Heinrich and Mina, while the rest listened in. Marianne stared at her plate, safe from stray looks, as far away as possible from any exchange that might lead to Ken Tanaka.

At the stroke of seven, Roy called the meeting to order. After the introductory hubbub, Roy got right to it. “Ed, you have a matter for the Board.”

Ed faced Roy, speaking only to him. Ed was formal, as if talking to a judge.

“Yes, I have a motion concerning Del Musselman, that he be removed from the Board of Directors, by reason of his misconduct as chair of the Annual Show Committee, as set forth in our bylaws.”

Ed turned to Del, and they were looking each other square in the eye, like gunfighters in a western — about to shoot it out because there was no other way.

Roy said to the meeting, “We have a motion. Do members of the Board wish to offer discussion or questions?”

Everyone was wound up tight. The wrong word could escalate into a full-on saloon brawl — tables overturned, chairs thrown through the window, Tranquilina storming in and firing a shot into the ceiling.

Coral Finchum spoke first. No fire and brimstone. She was modest, reflective.

“We’re faced with a choice. It’s about two long-term members of the club. If we support Del, we lose Ed. To keep Ed, we have to remove Del. The situation feels drastic and sudden. I don’t see why it has to be this way.”

Coral gazed across the table with large, beautiful eyes. Her hair lay like the shawl of a suppliant at an altar. She looked into Ed’s face with a woman’s plea for peace.

“Is there some way this can be settled between you and Del — for the good of the club?”

Ed was stone cold.

Then Lucius Tiber spoke, brushing crumbs with a napkin from his eely lower lip.

“I quite agree. There is no reason for the stakes to be so high. We’re being forced to exact a too-severe penalty for Del’s misstep. In fact, I’m not sure Del went beyond his authority as Show chair. I only know that Ed is extremely upset. As an interim measure, to allow both parties time to work out a solution, I wonder if we might table Ed’d motion for now.”

“That will not fly,” Ed intoned. “You knew this vote was coming. You’ve had time to consider. I won’t accept delay instead of a decision. Vote Del off the Board, or I resign.”

Roy thanked everyone for keeping voices temperate and language polite. Looking to the far end of the room, he asked if observers at the meeting wished to comment or ask a question. He recognized the jewelry teacher Margot Arrete. Margot stood to make herself heard, her platinum hair swaying and bedizened fingers waving.

“The vote tonight goes beyond Del tampering with Ed’s display case. Which was despicable, by the way. Respect for the dead and letting go of grudges is about as basic as it gets when it comes to having a decent society. But the larger issue is ... this faction that Del is the leader of. I’m talking about the heel-digging, jaw-clamping Mafia of No.”

Roy said, “It’s important that we hear your view, Margot, but words like *mafia* don’t

help. They make people mad, on both sides. Be passionate, but no name-calling, please.”

“Not a problem,” said Margot, fluttering her rings and bracelets. “I’m house-broken. I can be the submissive woman.”

Roy did not rise to the bait. Margot continued.

“What this Board needs to realize is: members of the club are aware of the infighting, and we’re sick of it. We expect our leaders to run a good club, good for all members. That may mean different things to different people, but it does not mean run the club exactly the way it was run in the 1980s. There’s something rotten in RGMS. And I won’t be satisfied until Ed Bailey is satisfied, and he says the club is back on the right track.”

Suzette Sanger hissed, “If there are members who don’t like the way this club is run, let them join another club.”

“Please wait to be recognized, Suzette,” Roy said. “The chair recognizes Del Musselman.”

Del spoke to Ed, his voice level. “I don’t lead a faction, that’s the first thing. It happens that a majority of Board members have views similar to mine. Second, I don’t agree that I’ve harmed the club in any way with my views or actions. Margot has her opinion, but I don’t know that she represents anyone other than herself. Third, the display cases were my responsibility. I see now removing Ken Tanaka’s name badge was a bad decision. I regret it, and I would like a chance to make amends. But it was my decision to make. I don’t deserve to be thrown off the Board for that.”

It was as if the room heaved a sigh. Del had offered an apology, or something close to it.

Ed replied, “You’re mistaken in your second point.”

“You’re saying I have harmed the club with my views or actions. Is that just a general

statement, or do you have something specific in mind?"

Ed replied, "Last Saturday, Luis Regalo's nephew asked me, in so many words, if Ken Tanaka was murdered. He wanted to know exactly where you were standing when Ken fell 65 feet to his death."

There were twenty pairs of eyes in the room. All of them got big as saucers — with the possible exception of Roy Avlone's.

Ed continued. "The poison of your hatred for Ken has soaked down to the newest members in our club. And you can bet it has reached the ears of the club's most important backer. Del, you need to go. The people who vote with you — they need to start thinking for themselves."

There was not a breath of air left in the room.

Roy announced a ten-minute break. He left the room, with a slight lift of his eye toward Del. Pandemonium blazed in every wondering face — was someone saying Ken Tanaka was murdered?

Del followed Roy out of the room.

When Roy returned, he reported that Del Musselman had resigned voluntarily from the Board of the Reseda Gem and Mineral Society.

Chapter 11

Time's Shadow

After lunch, the McCleggys went to a plant sale at Encantada Nursery, known for cacti and dinosaur sculptures in sheet metal — the owner's hobby. Sally and I went back to the workshop. Marianne was at the door, filling in as keeper of the badges for the afternoon. She had her big smile, exuding cheer.

"Romeo, your first workshop. How's it going?"

"I started carving with Mike Banks."

"Excellent. How about you, Sally?"

"Workshop 101. There's a lot to learn."

"I know the feeling. You need to meet Hector Pradera, our boy genius. He's also our best cabbings coach."

Marianne paused, took a breath, and turned back to me. "Your name came up at the Board meeting the other night."

"So I heard. We had lunch with the McCleggys."

"So you got the lowdown," she said. "If you have questions, we can talk."

The three of us agreed to regroup after Marianne's tour of duty at the door.

Marianne led Sally through a maze of tables and equipment to a cabbings machine, next to the one where Hector Pradera was polishing colorful stones for RGMS school events. Sally saw right away that Hector was a quiet sixteen-year-old, good-looking enough to be popular but shy and absorbed in his own thoughts. He probably had no idea girls envied his hair.

"Marianne says you're the best teacher."

"She's cool," Hector said. "Let's see what you're working on."

Sally showed him a rectangle of orbicular jasper, dopped and ready to polish. Its "picture" made Sally think of bubble bath from another planet, with a black, crab-like feature lurking at the lower left.

"Interesting," Hector said. "A pendant? How do you want it to look when it's done?"

"Like a book. Or like the cover of a sci-fi magazine. I'm thinking of trying a series of pendants like SF covers."

"Awesome. You're into science fiction?"

"Space junkie since middle school."

"Okay. Then you'll probably want a soft finish, not high gloss. You'll keep the rectangle corners but soften them a little, like old paper. Does that sound right?"

"You've got me exactly."

"Any ideas for the setting?"

"Not one."

"Maybe something resembling a wire rack, like stores used to have for comics and pulp magazines. Ha! We could make it black wire and scuff it a little for a neglected look."

"I gotta say, Marianne was right. You are the best."

"She's the best, I think."

"I like her too."

Vision defined, Sally went to work. Hector explained the six wheels, ranging from 80 grit on the left to 14,000 on the right — grinding to final polish. He mentioned the number three wheel was sometimes a stumbling block for beginners — where scratches became

evident that required going back to the second wheel.

Sally and Hector cabbed, they conversed, and they arrived — as all sci-fi conversations must — at the possibility of life on other planets.

The vastness of the universe and unimaginable number of stars made life on other planets a certainty, they agreed. The question was whether contact was possible. Finding other life in the vastness — even recognizing it as life — was by no means certain. It was reasonable to scan for planets with a nitrogen-oxygen atmosphere — a sign of organic/carbon chemistry, as on Earth. But there was every reason to suppose life-chemistry on other worlds might not be based on carbon. What if extraterrestrial life was based on silicon?

“Scientists say it’s unlikely,” Hector acknowledged, “because carbon is so versatile. It has more ways of forming long molecular chains. More molecular options means more ways of controlling and fine-tuning chemical processes. Body temperature, nourishment, dealing with waste — these require chemistry that can be selective and gradual, not just full on and full off. Silicon has fewer ways of building graduated systems like that.

“And yet we’re seeing those systems develop. Humans are working hard to build those systems. Artificial intelligence is based entirely on silicon chemistry. From transistor radios to computers and now systems that recognize our faces, systems that are learning to think as we do, but with less error. If aliens get their first look at Earth a century from now, they might conclude life here is based on silicon chemistry, with carbon-based life forms doing the schlepping.

“A rock as we know it today has very limited mobility. It can roll down a hill. It can melt and flow like lava or change into metamorphic rock. What if silicon-based beings overcome these limitations, taking advantage of the superior mobility of bipeds despite their modest brain power? In your car, you are the chauffeur. The chip knows where you’re going.

“There’s a poem about Mt. Shasta by John Rollin Ridge, from 1850. He says Mt Shasta is like an ‘unimpassioned mind’ looking down on mountains and plains for two hundred miles around. People traveling can feel Shasta watching. Ridge thinks of Shasta as the cold eye of law and justice.

“Geologically, Shasta is a volcano, built up in layers of silicon-rich rock — like an enormous semiconductor. Or an incredible complex of countless semiconductors, capable of googols of calculations per second.”

“You’re making me want to drive north and have another look at Mt. Shasta.”

“Take the I-5, nine hours.”

“Have you been there?”

“I need to get a car first.”

+ + +

As a teenage boy, Hector Pradera had little interest in making jewelry. He liked going on field trips. He liked finding and identifying different kinds of rocks. He liked using equipment in the workshop — the saws, the wheels, the drills and routers, the torches and solder, the pliers and clamps, and the epoxy.

Instead of rings, pendants, or bracelets, he made sundials for the wrist. As Hector said, “If someone asks you what time it is, you just hold your wrist up so the gnomon points north, and the shadow falls on the hour. No winding, no battery. It works all day, every day. Unless it’s cloudy.”

Hector’s earliest designs were plain disks with carved numerals and a leather strap. He

advanced to fancy-faced disks of jasper with inset numerals or marks — opal, silver, chalcedony. Using strontium aluminate paint, Hector created the world’s first glow-in-the-dark wrist sundial.

Admittedly, there were obstacles to perfecting the wrist sundial for everyday use. On such a small disk, the spaces between hours had to be very tight. The difference between 11:15 and 11:45 could be difficult to discern. The wire gnomon, too, was a problem. It had to be thick enough to cast a shadow, but the shadow had to be thin enough to fit between very small hours. Despite best efforts, wire gnomons always got snagged on a sweater eventually or crunched on an armrest and had to be recalibrated. Hector decided against protecting the gnomon with a crystal, as on wristwatches, because the fragile-gnomon problem was smallish compared to the problem of people wanting to tell time indoors.

“People can walk to the window if they want to know the time,” Marianne said. “The important thing is looking fine in your custom-design. Sundials by Hector of Reseda.”

Ultimately, the wrist sundial became what rockhounds call a display piece. Its place was on a shelf.

Five wrist sundials were on display in Hector Pradera’s display case. Each design had a name, shown in elegant script on a dove gray card: Primero, Jalama, Marianne, Mojave River, and Shasta.

+ + +

Sally showed me her completed first cabochon. I liked it and said so. Its shape reminded me of a shrunken box of cereal, possibly a brand to be called Weird-Os. I kept that inspiration to myself. Sally was very happy with her work.

“Hector said it was good to start out with a flat design. Suzette likes to critique first cabs. She tips them back and forth, looking for a blip in the reflected ceiling lights. A blip means your dome is not perfect. As if the first cab you ever make should be perfect.”

“I am forewarned,” I said. “My dome will have a nipple.”

“Right. Let’s go find Marianne.”

Marianne was waiting near the entrance, peering into a display case that was parked in an out-of-the-way corner. When she turned to us, her eyes were welling with tears. She lit up the smile, full power.

“Let’s get out of here,” she said.

The display case contained a life-size mosaic of a desert tortoise. The right rear quadrant of the shell was not filled in.

Marianne asked how we liked our first workshop. We assured her together and individually that we liked it and would come to the next one. Sally showed off her sci-fi magazine cabochon.

“Hector said with the next one we can try edging the top and the right side to make it look like pages.”

“That means he likes your idea.”

“He’s a great kid.”

“Yes, he is,” Marianne said. “Unfortunately, his mother hates me.”

“I thought Linda Pradera was your friend.”

“She was. I’ll fill you in.”

At the parking lot, Sally insisted that Marianne come for coffee at our house, where she could meet Hamish. Sally rode with Marianne.

Hamish sat in his seat at the puzzle table. Marianne took the seat next to him. Though she brought no treats, Hamish seemed to like her. He allowed her to make kissy noises in his face and flatten his alpine ears, as if that counted as petting.

“The McCleggys said you didn’t say anything at the Board meeting,” Sally began.

“There wasn’t much I could say, under the circumstances.”

“How so?”

The big smile was long gone. Marianne spoke as if she were recounting something seen on television.

“A couple of days before the Board meeting, Roy asked me to talk to Ed Bailey. He wanted me to persuade Ed not to make a scene. It was a strange conversation. Like he was asking me to lobby someone in the governor’s office.”

“What did you say?”

“I said hell, no I wasn’t going to plead with Ed Bailey. Ed’s a grown man. Twice my age. If he’s got something to say to the Board, he should go ahead and say it.”

“How did Roy take that?”

“The ‘twice my age’ may have hit a nerve. He said he was disappointed. He hoped I would have done him this favor, for the good of the club.”

“Was he angry?”

“Roy never shows anger. It’s never personal. It was for the club. He understood very well it would be personal to Ed, but it shouldn’t be personal for me. Our marriage has never been about how I feel.

“I married Roy because I adored him. He was a hero. He was surprised and grateful to get that kind of attention from me — so young, intelligent, beautiful — his words. Roy has tried hard

to provide a life he thought should make me happy. He has never seen my work as important to anyone, you know, except to me. It probably isn't important. Our relationship has always been about his important work."

"Nice to make your acquaintance, Mrs. John Muir."

"Sally, you're funny."

"If there had been a vote at the meeting, what do you think would have happened?" I asked.

"If Del had not resigned, he would have been voted out, no question. Doris Drusenberg loves Del, but RGMS has been her life. She couldn't stand a scandal, a cloud over everything. And Lucius, for all his airs, is a practical man. Del would have been out by at least three votes — thanks to the ammunition Ed got from you."

"That was not my intention," I protested. "On the other hand, I have a history of upsetting apple carts. I am a serial apologizer."

"In the end, the consequences will be good — not only for RGMS but for Del. He's a guy who splattered cherry pie in anger. He has shown a lot more self-control since then."

Chapter 12

Rocco's Pizza

Hamish knows not to bark when people come to the door at Regalo's Rockhound Shop. Those people are customers. He allows them to walk around, but keeps a wary eye open. All bets are off if a customer walks in with a dog. Every dog gets a face to face greeting. I know without looking that a dog has entered the shop when the jingle of the bell above the door is followed by toenails scrambling on linoleum. Pavlov's dog is alive and well in Reseda.

Jingling and scrambling announced a rare Monday morning customer in the shop, Coral Finchum. Her hair was a sunlit summit in the glare of the door. She was preceded by a blond Chihuahua, whose name she used repeatedly. "Here we are, Whisky. Through the door, through the door, Whisky. Wait for me, Whisky." Whisky scurried left and right on a leash, his dark eyes bugged out and ready for yet more monstrosities in this world of giants. Coral and I exchanged pleasantries while Hamish and Whisky sniffed reciprocally, tails wagging friendly intentions.

"I came by to make sure you heard both sides of the story."

"Thank you. What story did you have in mind?"

"I went to the office first, Regalo Properties," Coral said. Her sigh said the shop suffered by comparison. "They sent me here."

"I wear many hats."

"Whisky, be good."

"You can let him wander if you'd like. Some of our favorite customers are dogs."

“Be good and I’ll give you a treat.” Coral opened her purse. It was blatantly tiny, seeming to insist that all things needful could be made to fit. Then she changed her mind. She unclicked Whisky, and he trotted off, nails tapping.

“We heard at the Board meeting you thought Ken Tanaka might have been murdered.”

“I didn’t say that. I asked where Del was at the time.”

“But you wouldn’t ask that question unless you thought something was suspicious. Someone must have said something to you.”

“Actually, no one said anything. That’s what got my attention. An experienced hiker fell off a cliff, and no one wondered why. Why that particular moment — was he reaching for something? Was he showing signs of fatigue or confusion? There don’t seem to have been any contributing circumstances.”

“Accidents happen.”

“Yes, they do.”

“Even professionals get distracted.”

“I’m sure that’s true, but if it were your friend, or anyone you saw and spoke to pretty regularly, wouldn’t you ask — looking for a reason why?”

“The Lord takes us in His good time. He doesn’t have to give reasons.”

“Of course. Some mysteries are never solved, but that doesn’t stop people from talking. Was Ken a drug user? Did he skip lunch? Has Del ever dabbled in voodoo?”

“What?”

“I haven’t heard a single inappropriate joke about the deceased. It’s kind of odd. There are always one or two zingers in the air when an enemy kicks the bucket.”

“Respect for the dead isn’t odd.”

“In my experience, when people don’t ask questions, it’s because they’re afraid of answers. Tell me, please, what is everyone so afraid of hearing?”

“As a matter of fact, that’s what I came to tell you. Ken Tanaka was sleeping with Roy Avalone’s wife, It’s a delicate subject.”

“People never gossip about delicate subjects.”

“It caused a lot of pain,” Coral said. “It caused a lot more after Ken Tanaka died.”

“How did you find out about Ken and Marianne?”

“Everybody knows about it.”

“Did everybody know on the field trip when Ken died?”

“Yes, everybody knew. It was common knowledge after Quartzsite last year.”

“Where were you when Ken fell from the cliff?”

“Oh, Romeo.” Coral giggled. “I don’t do field trips.”

“Was Roy Avalone on the field trip?”

“Yes.”

“Did you wonder if the jealous husband killed his wife’s lover?”

“That’s ridiculous,” Coral said. “Roy Avalone would no more take a human life than he would cut down a redwood.”

“Then give me your honest opinion,” I said, waiting until she nodded yes. “Is Del Musselman capable of killing someone in anger?”

“Whisky, come!” Coral called. She brought her eyes back to me. “Yes, Del is capable of violence. He struggles with anger. Obviously, he did not murder Ken Tanaka. Del was a hundred feet away when the accident happened. Let me ask you the same question about

Marianne. Would she be capable of killing someone?"

"Good question," I said. I hadn't even considered the possibility. "Marianne seems fragile — too close to the edge herself to push anyone else over. Of course, I wouldn't bet anybody's life on it."

"Sin begets sin."

"That's a fact," I admitted.

"The devil lends us his strength in pursuit of greater sin."

I nodded agreement. "Nature finds a way."

"Marianne Avalone was an adulteress, trampling her vows of marriage, glorying in her infidelity."

"You're not going to call her a whore, are you?"

"She was not a prostitute."

"She was in love."

"Sex outside of marriage is sin."

"That's a strict rule."

"Strict rules make the line clear. Clarity keeps us from sliding into destruction," Coral said. Her face softened. Her eyes were beautiful, as James McCleggy had remarked. "If I may ask, Romeo, were you married in a church?"

"I was married in a church and divorced in county court."

"So you and —"

"Sally."

"So you and Sally, are you married? You wear a wedding ring."

"Sally and I wear rings but we're not married."

"I don't understand. What is the meaning of the rings without vows of marriage?"

"Sally and I believe that vows are the number one cause of marriage failure."

"Tell me how vows to stay married are a threat to staying married."

"Vows let you get lazy, take things for granted."

"Vows allow you to trust."

"Trust is a happy way of saying 'take for granted.'"

"So how do you stay together?"

"It's pretty simple. I ask myself every day, *What if some other guy comes along and offers Sally the moon and stars? What have I done in the last twenty-four hours that will make her say no?*"

"What have you done in the last twenty-four hours?"

"I gave Hamish a bath."

Coral was unimpressed.

"It was Sally's turn," I pointed out.

"And tomorrow?"

"That is to be determined tomorrow. The commitment is new each day, every day."

"How can anyone carry on like that?"

"Think of it as part of your morning routine. You take a good look in the mirror. You're about to brush your teeth. You ask yourself why. Why bother brushing my teeth?"

"And what is your answer?"

"My answer is: I brush every day because life would get ugly fast without good choppers."

"And?"

“And we put our rings on again.”

“Has a woman offered you the moon and stars?”

“The world’s a vast garden of vows, wilting by the hour,” I said. “My life would get ugly fast without Sally.”

+ + +

Ordering a pizza tests a friendship, Ken Tanaka once said. It reveals whether friends are friends because they are of one mind — united in their cheese-headedness, for example, or in their antipathy to pineapple. Then again, pizza consensus may reflect a ratio of assertiveness to agreeableness that enables friends to keep being friends. “Collaborative pizza,” Ken declared, his finger thrust in the air as if twirling a high-gluten dough, “can be an exercise in community!”

He invited eight RGMS members to create a lapidary slice for the club’s first annual “Rocco’s Pizza” display case. He started with the venerable Doris Drusenberg, who said yes, and the other seven — including four who were new members — fell right in line, happy to be chosen for this select group. Ken made a point of inviting two old-timers who disliked each other heartily. The only thing Margot Arrete and Soapy Stovall had in common was their high regard for Hector Pradera, who had agreed to contribute a slice, and so there was peace among the pizza artists. Ken encouraged the group to consult and collaborate, so that the assembled eight slices would wow viewers with a range of materials, techniques, and styles.

The “Rocco’s Pizza” display case was decorated as an iconic pizzeria, with red-checked café curtains, a candle-dribbled Chianti bottle, and a wine glass half-filled with

crushed amethyst. The menu read:

Mama Mia Classic

Jasper pepperoni, rhyolite mushrooms, basalt olives, and hematite-crystal sauce on granitic crust. Dig in! *Doris D.*

So Cal Local

Travertine crust, manganese pepperoni, and quartzite crumbles — all within driving distance. *Matthew Kim*

Don't Worry, Bead Happy

Delica bead basil on a bed of bead cheese, with carnelian pimento and basanite capers. *Jen Perry*

Prehistoric Seafood Special

Turritella snail shells, 15 million years old, from coastal mountains after spring rains. Fresh! *Hector Pradera*

Prospector's Pizza

Gold flakes in river sand, a sight to delight '49ers then and now. *Soapy Stovall*

Copper Bopper

How repoussé, with shapes of pepperoni, mushroom, and olive hammered into sheet copper. *Margot Arrete*

Pretty Pebble Pie

A schmear of colorful stones from five states, deposited by the Colorado River. *Nargiz Zachary*

Urban Pizza

A collage of found rocks, from sidewalk chips to turquoise in a thrift store. *Benny Salazar*

Ken submitted the "Rocco's Pizza" display case for the annual show, suggesting that it be credited to the Membership committee as a collaborative project. Coral Finchum agreed. Her theory of collaborative pizza was: "As long as I get my pepperoni, I don't care what anybody else is having."

+ + +

The Regalo Building is a four-story exception in a two-story town — a lozenge of bluish glass with a full-service bank at the bottom and offices of attorneys, accountants, insurance agents, realtors, escrow agents, financial advisers, and brow-crinkling investment partnerships on top. There is an open-air cupola on the roof with an empire-builder's view to the mountains north and south and along Sherman Way. Uncle Luis and I were having coffee.

We sipped from dainty cups with painted vines and flowers. The cups were from a 48-piece millionaire's picnic set from the 1920s. The stiffened rattan basket was as large as a chauffeur could carry. Uncle Luis and I sat at a heavy oak table on benches that were sealed in a dozen coats of varnish. Slatted windows let in a late afternoon breeze.

"Roy Avalone came by earlier."

"What did he have to say?"

"Roy wanted to assure me everything was fine at RGMS. It seems a troubling question arose at the last Board meeting, about Ken Tanaka's death. There were concerns. Del Musselman chose to step down, so the club could move on. Et cetera. Not that Del did anything wrong. Roy wanted me to know there was nothing at all to worry about."

"Except that 'murder' struck a nerve."

"That it did."

"Did he say anything about the feud between Del and Ken? Or about Ken having an affair with his wife?"

"That he did not. So I asked about the rumors. Roy told me, in confidence, he knew about the affair. He did not confront Marianne or Ken about it. I asked why, and he said..."

Uncle Luis paused, looking out to the panorama of houses and shops below, all seemingly alike.

"I find this remarkable. Roy said he would never get Marianne back by depriving her of love. I said to him, 'Are you nuts? You let your wife go on thinking you didn't care?' But Roy said she knew he cared. She understood losing her would be the worst thing that ever happened in his life."

Uncle Luis shrugged. "But I'm not so sure Marianne understood all that."

"I agree. Marianne told Sally and me Roy didn't take her seriously."

"I wonder what she thought about the earrings."

"What earrings?"

"Roy gave her a pair of faceted topaz earrings. In a velvet-lined box. Not her birthday, not their anniversary. She asked what was the occasion. He told her he loved her."

"That was a good answer."

"Roy told her topaz was believed in ancient times to have magical powers, protecting travelers from storms and robbers."

"I've seen those earrings," I said. "They dangle. Stones shaped like teardrops. Marianne was wearing them when she said Roy didn't take her seriously."

The view from the cupola was telescopic. I could see the crazy granite outcrops at Santa Susana Pass. There are days in the Valley when its drab expanse pops into sharp focus. You can see, as De Anza saw, that such a breadth of level land would be practical for grazing cattle and the horses needed to manage large estates. You can see, as the peoples

before the Spaniards saw, paths for trade to villages by the ocean. You can see, as Harry Chandler and his co-investors saw, before the big water swindle of 1905, vast harvests of money growing on trees, thanks to irrigation. That money was small change compared to the bounty the land would yield when sold in small bits to returning soldiers after the war and to the swarms of home buyers who kept coming through the 1950s and 1960s. Newcomers spread across the San Fernando Valley in a thin layer like peanut butter on Wonder bread.

Reseda is a living memory of the postwar boom. The houses were built fast, en masse, and priced for workers at aircraft plants. Each house had a small lawn, a spiked fence, and a one-car garage. There are two or three cars in every driveway today, and the streets are parked solid. Most blocks have a house where a rooster crows in the morning.

Sherman Way was the retail street America dreamed of while packing its bags for sunny California. It ran mile after mile, like a red carpet rolled out for the little guy, a palm-lined corridor of small businesses. Trees and shrubs down the middle made its four lanes seem cozy, blazoning an unhurried, uncrowded way of life, extending infinitely to suburban contentment.

The sidewalks tell a different tale today. Gone is the spacious shoe emporium of yesteryear and its arrays of vinyl-cushioned chairs, with ladies' shoes on this side and mens' on that, and salesmen who knelt to consider each customer's foot.

Sherman Way has become more hectic, catch as catch can, more like a bazaar than a promenade. Stores split in two or three to meet rising rents. Stalls packed to the ceiling with folded jeans and t-shirts now roll their racks of dresses and sunglasses outside. The smog-check stations, tattoo parlors, hair and nail salons, the credit dentists, cash remitters,

seafood shops and delis huddle now amid the franchise networks, signage gleaming — coffee, car parts, cell phones, mini-marts. The most wretched among us, say the dollar stores and storefront churches, can save or still be saved.

Looking west from the cupola, I could see the shop where Uncle Luis bought his millionaire's picnic set. It straddles the line between used furniture and antiques, with armoires and dining room sets on display wherever they will fit. The dog in back knows not to bark when the bell above the door jingles and a customer walks in.

Chapter 13

Quartzsite

Sally and I went to the park for an early morning walk around Lake Balboa. Hamish led the way on a taut leash. The park is a great place to meet new dogs.

Past the playground, we rambled by a bay where the coots swam in circles and wandered the sidewalk, like eight-balls in striped stockings. Under tall trees, men in folding chairs waited for their freestanding fishing lines to wriggle. Egrets stood by at a polite distance, in case a catch was deemed too small to keep. We had to stop to socialize with every lab, pug, beagle, and poodle that came down the pike.

While Hamish exchanged greetings with a whippet, Sally told me about Linda Pradera. “She’s bitter about her trip to Quartzsite with Marianne.”

Linda had sidled up to Sally during our second visit to the workshop, the weekend after our first. Sally was starting another cabochon in the sci-fi magazine series. I was off somewhere chatting with Lucius Tiber about potato chips.

Linda said to Sally, “Hector has a crush on you. Like it was with Marianne.”

“He’s still got the crush on Marianne, if you ask me,” Sally said.

“Yes,” said Linda. “That infatuation caused him a lot of turmoil. You also have made quite an impression on Hector. I don’t want him to get even more confused.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Just be careful. I don’t want Hector to feel rejected, but he’s a teenager. He goes overboard. He hasn’t had a lot of experience with girls.”

“I’ve been appropriate with him. Always adult to child. He’s a good kid.”

"Just don't flirt with him."

"I haven't flirted."

"The way Marianne did. Touching his sleeve. Making him aware of her body."

"Linda, you're going to have tell me what's going on. What am I in the middle of?"

Linda told Sally about carpooling to Quartzsite with Marianne. The Arizona town of Quartzsite is a mecca for rockhounds in January, a sprawling gem and mineral flea market with 500 vendors and two indoor bathrooms. There are myriad porta-potties, and motorhomes by the thousand.

Linda and Marianne were both planning to go to Quartzsite, as they learned while chatting at a New Ideas meeting at Ken Tanaka's house. Roy was not going with her to Quartzsite, Marianne said. Quartzsite was for wildcatters and Old West diehards, according to Roy. Linda suggested that she and Marianne carpool and split the gas.

Linda and Hector picked up Marianne before dawn on Friday. Hector slept in the back seat. "Teenagers need their rest," Linda explained. "During Christmas vacation, he didn't get up till almost noon."

Marianne was excited for rock shopping. Linda was too, but she also wanted to take lots of pictures. Linda had discovered photography in college and hoped one day to create a collection worthy of an exhibition. Marianne said she knew editors at *LA Weekly* if Linda wanted to publish. Linda said no, she didn't have time for commitments beyond being a single mom and an ER nurse at Reseda General Hospital.

They arrived five hours later at a huge dirt parking lot. The cars were almost outnumbered by pickup trucks and motorhomes with kayaks on top. A man in a straw hat and bib overalls drove a tractor and wagon rig around the parking lot, a backcountry

shuttle to the Pow Wow.

Marianne, Linda, and Hector spent the morning window-shopping, though there were no windows — just row after row of popup awnings with tables of rocks and sunbeaten proprietors standing nearby, like hopeful egrets. The three of them stayed together and ran into other small groups of RGMS members. It was surprising, said Hector, considering the crowd was in the tens of thousands.

The McCleggys, the Blatts, and Lucius Tiber hallooed Hector, Marianne, and Linda, eager to give directions to a fun booth they had found, The Rock Chocolateer.

“He’s amazing,” gushed Roz. “Boxes and boxes of cabochons that look like Valentine candy, with little paper wrappers for each of the ‘chocolates.’ But they’re rocks! He dips the cabochons in brown wax for the ‘chocolate’ coating. You turn the bottom up to see the rock nougat inside.”

James McCleggy chimed in, “The centers are brown jasper: creamy or with swirls. Some have orbs or flecks in the nougat.”

“Bruneau jasper?” Hector asked. “Mookaite?”

“Indeed, but you must try the puddingstone,” interjected Lucius Tiber, his eyes closing with remembered bliss. “And the Boulder Opal with inclusions, to die for!”

“Sure, it looks delicious,” Heinrich Blatt said, in a Groucho Marx impression, “but there ain’t no vitamins.”

“They’re all minerals!” the McCleggys sang out with Heinrich.

Meanwhile Mina’s hat kept blowing off her head.

“How are you doing that?” Marianne wanted to know. There was no breeze.

Mina opened her eyes wide and puckered her mouth. She shrugged with palms upward.

And her hat fell off again.

The two groups went their ways, as Hector wanted to look at nodules of moldavite, the greenish glassy byproduct of a Miocene meteoritic impact, before lunch.

At noon, Marianne said goodbye to Linda and Hector. She had told Linda beforehand she would meet some friends from Phoenix who were camping north of town, and she would stay with them. Linda and Hector had a motel reservation in Blythe. The plan was to meet up Sunday at noon in the parking lot for the drive home.

“See you Sunday. Have a great time, and take lots of pictures,” Marianne said, waving bye.

“You too,” said Linda, squeezing Hector to her side.

Hector watched until Marianne disappeared into the crowd under a high desert sun.

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The “Quartzsite” display case by Linda Pradera was a photo collage on brown burlap. The coarse weave and over-baked color of this drapery gave a fair impression of La Posa Plain and the Dome Rock Mountains. Linda scorched the burlap here and there with an iron.

Profile shots of motorhomes, lined up like elephants trunk to tail, served as a frame across the top and down the sides of the display. The motorhomes — from the 15-foot beluga-size models to the 45-foot gray whales, some dragging a small car for local zipping around — were christened vessels: Road Commander, Mountain Master, Prairie Clipper, Vistas Baron, Sunset Luster...

Views of a camping city filled the motorhome frame. Dusty pilgrims in blue jeans

and ball caps, snowbird couples in boonie hats and boat shoes — they all wandered by open-air tents of refugee rocks. Some of the tents flew flags of ramshackle nations, known in the news for civil war or chronic unrest, dangerous for tourists off the beaten path.

In the foreground of the display case stood five formal portraits, two sitting, three standing. Each portrait came with a quotation. The seated portraits were the men.

“He does the digging. I do all the cutting.”

— Janis Wells, 23, Thunder Egg Dream Shop, Loco Hills, New Mexico

“My back hurts so bad I can’t work in my own store.”

— Charles “Tex” Bolton, 56, Magic Valley Carpet-Rama, Twin Falls, Idaho

“People in charge can’t see there’s a revolution coming.”

— Trip Denning, 34, unsituated after three tours in Iraq, Lone Pine, California

“I grew up in a house with plank floors, no running water.”

— Audra Spikenard, 78, Jasper Creations, McDermitt, Oregon/Nevada

[Call 911. I just swallowed a chocolate-covered rock.]

— Mina Blatt, 45, Speechless Theater, Los Angeles, California

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Marianne was ashen when Linda met her in the parking lot on Sunday. Marianne stood up from her suitcase. She put on a cheerful face but wobbled on her feet. Her suitcase fell over backward.

"Silly me," Marianne sighed.

"Never mind," Linda said. She took Marianne's wrist in a nurse's businesslike way, checking her pulse. She saw Marianne's pupils were contracted, appropriately for outdoor light, but her forehead was cool and damp to the touch. "When did you last have water?"

"About an hour," Marianne said. "Really, I'm all right."

"You're pale. Maybe a cold or flu coming on?"

"Just tired, I think. No energy left."

"Have you had any alcohol or any feel-good substance in the last few hours?"

"Nothing like that," Marianne said. Then she added, "I got some bad news."

Linda gave Marianne a long look, holding her at arms' length. "All right, let's get you home."

Linda carried Marianne's suitcase to the car. Hector's smile was groggy. Linda had given him an allergy pill, which made him sleepy. Linda hoisted the suitcase into the trunk and pulled out a medical kit.

"I have a sedative you can take to settle your nerves."

Marianne said she would be fine.

A line of cars inched toward the onramp. Thousands of rockhounds were returning to California, all at the same time. Low mountains with steep slopes and jagged rocks offered a slot view of the long drive west.

"Did you take a lot of good pictures?"

"No need to talk. Just rest for now. We can talk down the road if you feel like it."

They drove through an hour of silent desert. Dark hills slipped by like eels in a slow current. A search for soothing music on the radio led to nothing. Linda turned the radio off. Hector's slow breathing in back was the whispered chant of sweet oblivion. Marianne did not sleep.

"Did something happen with your friends from Phoenix?"

"There were no friends from Phoenix. I was with Ken."

"You were with Ken Tanaka these past three days."

"Yes."

"You don't have to tell me. I won't say anything."

"It doesn't matter. It won't be a secret much longer. Del Musselman saw me coming out of Ken's tent."

"Oh, God," Linda said. "How awful."

They held back from talking a little while. There was the hum of tires on the road, the shearing of air around the car. Linda looked over her shoulder at Hector, his breathing still slow and deep.

"Will you tell Roy, or wait for Del to tell him?"

"I don't know. I can't think."

"I understand," Linda said. "Del is a brute. You couldn't have put the dagger in more hateful hands."

"I didn't give Del a dagger. He just showed up."

There was another pause, neither one wanting to say more without thinking. Then Marianne turned to Linda. Her eyes were pinched and angled, pleading to be understood.

"Del came out of nowhere. On Sunday morning. The weird thing is... I've been afraid the whole time I've been with Ken. I was afraid of stumbling into a confrontation, having to explain myself. I felt right while Ken was there with me. I felt sure. When we were apart, I felt afraid. Or defiant.

"This morning... This morning I felt completely safe, relaxed, in a world that was only for Ken and me. Then Del was there, just like that. He didn't look shocked. He wasn't grinning at some filthy joke he would share later with the boys. It was more like I was an unexpected sight, like a big horn sheep turning up suddenly in the campground.

"I ran back in the tent. I told Ken it was Del. Ken went out to see what Del wanted. Del was already walking away. Ken watched him get into his truck and drive off. He said it was Del, no mistake."

"Del has a weapon now, one he can use to destroy his worst enemy."

"Yes. It's going to get bad all around. For me, for Ken, especially for Roy."

"I never thought I'd take a husband's side, but you ought to tell him yourself. The betrayal hurts, but the humiliation is going to be ten times worse."

"You say that like you know from experience. I'm sorry. I'm grateful for your helping me, with what to expect."

"It's hard to let go of the hurt. It stays there bright and sharp a long, long time."

"I don't know if I can tell Roy. I don't know how to talk to him about something like this, and make him understand. We don't talk about deep feelings, our doubts. What we want from each other."

"He doesn't need to understand. You're past that. He needs the facts. He'll figure out an explanation that works for him."

"So keep it simple."

"May as well."

Not really talking to Linda, Marianne ran through what she might say to Roy. "I've been having an affair with Ken. Del found out about it at Quartzsite. That's the nut, in two sentences. Who, what, where, when. No why. Keep it simple. Roy can decide what questions he needs to ask."

The San Jacinto Mountains loomed on their left. Marianne bent her head down to see their crest line through the windshield, draped in snow but sharp-edged. Ahead lay San Gorgonio, like a sleeping giant.

"Marianne, there's something else I need to say."

"Tell me."

"I am mad as hell you involved me in this."

Marianne nodded. "I'm sorry. I didn't think, and I should have."

"When this gets out, it's going to look like I was in on it." Linda let that sink in. "I don't know how it's going to affect Hector. He's already lost his father in similar circumstances."

"I see."

"You and I can continue to work together in the club."

"I appreciate that."

"I want you to stop coming to the workshop."

"That may be hard, if I'm still married to Roy."

"I want you to stay away from my son."

"All right, if that's what you want."

“Hector likes you, as you well know. When people are talking, it’s going to be hard for him to understand whose side he should be on. It will be hard for him to understand why grownups do the things they do.”

Marianne nodded, looking straight ahead. She let the tears overflow onto her cheeks. Hector’s breathing continued regular and deep in the back seat

“I did not choose to be in love with Ken,” Marianne said. “I want you to understand that. Ken happened to me, like a wind sweeping off those mountains.”

Chapter 14

Owl Hole

The phone rang in the middle of a rollicking game of Who's Smarter, Man or Dog? To play, you need a man, a dog, and his favorite chew toy, a stuffed beaver with a paddle tail. I grabbed the toy and ran to the front of the store, cutting a U-turn around the island of waist-level shelves. Hamish came running after me, skidding into the front door at the turn. Re-gathering his legs, he fired his jets and caught up to me, because the dog runs faster than the man. A tug of war for the beaver ended with Hamish yanking it away, because the dog has powerful jaws. He ran off with the beaver, and we did a couple more laps around the island.

"Come back here, you thieving canine!"

I caught him and got the beaver back. The dog knows about taking turns. He chased me for a couple of laps.

"You'll never catch me, you misguided mutt!"

Then the wily dog took a shortcut at the middle of the island. He was waiting for me as I made my U-turn. Hamish grinned, his ears up like a pair of exclamation marks, as we came face to face. Who is smarter, man or dog?

"You win this time, Westie. But you've not heard the last of me."

The raspy male voice on the phone said, "This is Jerome Stovall, from the Reseda Gem and Mineral Society."

"Hi, Mr. Stovall. What can I do for you?"

"People call me Soapy," he said. "We have some donated equipment that needs moving to the workshop. I was wondering if you could help this morning with loading the truck."

"How far away?"

"From Doris's house to the workshop."

"What's the heaviest piece?"

"A 36-inch rock saw. It'll be about like carrying a pinball machine."

"How many guys do we have?"

"Me and Del so far. One more will be enough."

"Should I bring blankets, boxes, rope?"

Soapy gave me directions to Doris's house, on a woolly stretch of Corbin.

The driveway ran fifty yards to the house. It was the old-fashioned style with two narrow pavements and a strip of crabgrass between. Overhanging leaves of ornamental shrubs brushed the windshield. The house was a stoutly built and vaguely Spanish four-bedroom, enclosed by frowzy trees planted too close to the foundation.

"I grew up in this house," Doris said. "This was all orange trees back then."

"Who built it?"

"My father and his brother. They also built the house next door. There were seven of us cousins. We always had somebody to play with."

Doris and I sat with Del and Soapy at a heavy-legged maple dinner table with a scallop-edged veneer. There was a matching china cabinet. I could picture children being forbidden to come anywhere near Mother's dining room set without permission. Del, Soapy, and I clinked heavy silver forks at slices of lemon cake from the supermarket.

Almost a century tree herself, with eye sockets like knots in oak, Doris looked around the table with satisfaction. She had been trying for years, since Walter died, to clear out equipment they had accumulated and piles of rock she would never use. At last, she said, she had three strong men to help.

"We'll get 'er done," Soapy vowed.

"The cake is delicious, Doris," Del said. His mother too had had rules for behavior in the formal dining area.

"Thank you, Del. Credit goes to the bakery ladies at Market Day." Doris turned to me. "Really, it's preposterous to suggest such a nice young man could have murdered a fellow rockhound."

"I ask many foolish questions, Doris. It's almost a specialty of mine."

"I was a hundred feet away when it happened," Del said without heat.

"But you'd be surprised, wouldn't you, if Del or Soapy took a fall like that?

Experienced hikers are careful of their footing on a slope."

Doris's eyes rolled downward in their great sockets, as if to plumb the depths to which foolish men might sink. "Ken was young. Young men get carried away with their ideas. They think passion is a virtue."

"Are you talking about Marianne Avalone?"

"I was referring to Ken's ideas for the club. But since you mention it, he was very carried away with Marianne too. Besotted, I would say."

"Was Marianne near him at the time of the accident?"

"I use a walker nowadays. It's no good for field trips."

"Sorry to hear it. Everyone says you were the best at knowing where to dig, like a

douser for agate.”

“That’s true.” Doris glowed, recollecting. “‘Follow Doris,’ they used to say. ‘She always finds the good stuff!’”

“I wish I could have been around for those days.”

“It was different then.”

“Tell me how.”

“We camped a lot. We rockhounded all day, and had potluck at night. We sang around the campfire.”

“What songs did you sing?”

“Oh, there was one. Let me think. ‘If I had a hammer...’ I can’t sing. Another one was ‘You Are My Sunshine.’ And, of course, ‘This Land Is Your Land.’ We were happy then, so confident in the future.”

“Did you sing, Del?”

“That was before my time.” Del grinned, shaking his head. “When I came along, the world was recovering from disco. There was no singing. And we lost some of that confidence in the future.”

“Why is that?”

“Environmentalists.”

“Oh, come on.”

“A big change came to the desert. Areas were closed off to protect habitat. There were endless hearings about this species of scrub or that species of toad. They weren’t people who worked in the desert or played in the desert. They just knew about the desert, with their charts and graphs.”

"The desert wasn't still a very big place?"

"Pickings were thinner," Soapy put in.

"That's true too," Del admitted. "The glory days were coming to an end."

"I remember our last trip to the Owlshead Mountains, a little before they changed Death Valley from a national monument to a national park," Doris said. "That was a hell-and-back trip. We got home Sunday past midnight — a seven-hour drive after two days of digging from dawn till sundown. Walter and I were so worn out we slept in our clothes on top of the bed. Somehow I made it into work the next morning."

"There's a lot of juicy rock still up there," Soapy said.

"Our best places were already played out," Del said. "Rockhounds got every last piece that was easy to collect."

+ + +

Beneath a vintage map of Death Valley National Monument, Doris Drusenbergs display case, "Owl Hole Sagenite," gave pride of place to a nodule cut lengthwise like half a potato. On the exposed face, there was a frozen lake of agate, white at one end, storm blue at the other. A dense fringe of golden needles surrounded the lake, like tules as they might appear in heaven. Around the golden needles, as if traced by an idle fingertip, there was a ring of red the color of Georgia clay. The skin of the nodule was hell-weathered desert crust.

The "picture" on the exposed face was startlingly ... picturesque. It was an ant's eye of view of sparkling stalks of grain against a foreboding agate sky, with tufted clouds masking the inscrutable eye of the sun. Visions such as this must have inspired initiates in

the Eleusinian mysteries of ancient Greece. The needles of grain seemed about to explode from points of brilliance in scattered stalks. With this perspective, the nodule's unslabbed half seemed a miracle of restraint.

Five cabochons lay before the mother nodule.

On the left was a porcupine, cut from the blue end of the lake. Golden needles bristled above her soft dark body, two black dots for eyes peeping furtively. The figure on the right was a lady's face in profile, golden hair pulled back over the pale curve of her ear. Her long, pure neck flowed to a delicate chin and nose. Two lines, for her closed eyelid and compressed mouth, indicated a mood of uncertain waiting.

The three remaining cabochons were made by joining mirror-image halves together: a butterfly, a beetle, and a feather. The feather was all golden needles. Its opposing halves came from successive slabs of the mother nodule, flipped and turned to arc congruently along a white spine of agate.

The butterfly's wings split the lake and turned the shores outward. White wings, stitched with golden needles, reached to patches of red at the tips. The butterfly, like the feather, was set in a silver bezel and backplate.

The beetle was a red oval, like a lady bug in a golden grass skirt. Her wings were closed into a dome, her shoulders hunched above a sooty head. Her six black legs were oxidized silver prongs, holding on for dear life.

+ + +

Soapy was right about three guys being enough for the job. The big saw was only heavy at

the motor end. Soapy stood in the bed of his pickup truck, guiding the long box while Del and I lifted and pushed. He had come prepared with the right equipment and tools: a hose and 5-gallon can to drain the mineral oil, socket wrenches to take the legs off the saw cabinet, and a hand truck to roll it from Doris's shed to the pickup. As someone who struggles with stripped screws, bolts out of reach, and cumbersome objects that don't want to be carried, I respect a man who is handy.

At the workshop, there was a measured space ready and waiting for Doris's saw. Suzette was on hand to make sure all went according to plan. There was a brief discussion about which rock to cut first. Del suggested we sit down and celebrate a job well done.

"This is Maibock," Del said, passing a six-pack around the table. "It's a seasonal beer in Germany. This batch came from Wisconsin."

"I grew up in Wisconsin," Suzette said.

"I like it," said Soapy. "Tastes like beer."

"Me too." I said. "There's a malty taste."

"Maibock is for the six weeks that come before the full blast of summer," Del said, admiring its reddish-amber color in the clear bottle. "Lucius calls it an awakening after the sour beer of winter."

"That man will give you an earful about anything you put in your mouth," Suzette said. "And don't try to turn that into anything sexual. Do you say Mybock or Maybock?"

"Whatever," Del said.

Our table was at the classroom end of the workshop. The saws were loudly silent. Behind Del were shelves with trays of slabs, waiting for new members who would make their first cabochons.

"Del," I said, "what's going to happen now that the war is over?"

"What do you mean?"

"Ken is gone. You stepped down. Where does RGMS go from here?"

"It's not up to me." Del shook his head and took a short slug of the Maibock. "I just work here."

"You know the people."

"Roy Avalone, as president, will appoint a new chair for the Annual Show. Whoever it is will have a lot of impact. Their responsibilities — recruiting vendors, signing contracts for the site and services, getting volunteer staff organized — have ripple effects for years."

"Just not Margot, please," Suzette groaned.

"Roy needs a replacement for Ken as vice-president. The VP is the president in training, so it's another office with long-range importance. I'll say this much, and I don't care if it gets back to Luis Regalo: Roy Avalone is a hands-off kind of leader. He looks good as president, but he's not steering the ship."

"Where might Ed Bailey fit in? Or Mike Banks?"

"Mike Banks, well qualified. He's an artist, and he knows how to run a platoon. But he's not interested. At least that's what he told the Nominating Committee."

"Ed Bailey is a traitor," Suzette said.

"Ed is good at what he does," Del said. "He doesn't care much about the big picture, not like Roy Avalone or Ken Tanaka. Ed would be the first to say so himself."

"Ken Tanaka was a snake," Suzette hissed.

"When Ken received the blessing of the Nominating Committee, was it because he was a 'big picture' guy?"

Del nodded. "You know a lot for someone who just got here. Yes, Ken had vision and enthusiasm. He was young, and he sounded like the future. Of course, half the stuff he said was crazy nonsense, but we thought he'd settle down."

"If you knew in advance he would need breaking-in, what went wrong?"

"He showed his true colors," Suzette said. She slapped the table, and I thought of the smashed cherry pie at the Presidents Day Massacre.

"Looking back, I think we should have let him run with a few of his ideas. They would have failed, but he would have learned. And he would have been grateful to us for supporting him, win or lose. Looking back, I'd say it went bad because we didn't give as much rein as he needed. It was stubbornness. My stubbornness. My resentment."

"Things went wrong," Soapy interjected, "about the time young Ken took to poking the club president's wife."

"It didn't help matters," Del agreed.

"Then why did you tell everyone about Marianne and Ken, after you saw them at Quartzsite?"

"I didn't," Del said. "I never said a word about it to anyone, not even after the story got out."

"It was just you three — you, Marianne, and Ken. You're not suggesting Marianne or Ken spread the story."

"I know Ken didn't."

"That snake," Suzette said.

"You say that like you're sure, Del."

"Ken came to see me after Quartzsite. He said he would get out of my way

completely if I would just spare Marianne from humiliation. He would resign or he would serve as vice-president and give me his full support in any business before the Board. Whatever I wanted, just keep Marianne out of the story."

"You had a chance to de-fang him," Suzette gasped, "and you didn't take it?"

"There were times I'd have gladly knocked Ken's teeth down his throat," Del said. "I had no desire to hurt Roy or his silly wife. Or the club."

"Did you come to some kind of agreement with Ken?"

"I told Ken to forget it. It never happened as far as I was concerned."

"You could've run that low-lying egg-sucker right out of town," Soapy marveled.

"How did you happen to go to Ken's tent that particular morning?"

"It was a peace mission."

"A peace mission. What does that mean?"

"Well, I was going to ask Ken if there was a way for us to agree to not disagree so much in public — for the good of the club."

"How did you know where to find him?"

"Lucius told me Ken was at the Hi Jolly campground. I went early Sunday morning to look for him, so we could talk before he went into town. Suddenly there was Mrs. Avalone, bare-legged in a man's woolen overshirt."

"I can't get over it," Soapy said. "You had him dead in your sights and you let him get away."

"Did Lucius know what you would see when he sent you to that campground?"

"I'm not a mind reader," Del said. "Lucius is a highly intelligent man, very inquisitive. You get a feeling now and then that he's playing with you. But he didn't volunteer the

information. I asked if anyone knew where Ken was, and Lucius said at Hi Jolly.”

A silhouette filled the workshop door, an airport security guard. He asked if anything special was going on today. Suzette thanked him for checking and walked over to show him Doris’s saw.

“Del, I want to thank you for introducing me to Maibock,” I said. “I enjoyed it greatly, and having a chance to talk.”

“We’ll have another sometime,” Del said.

“Was it Coral Finchum’s idea that we get together?”

“She put in a word to that effect.”

I took my leave. Over my shoulder, I heard Soapy say to Del:

“You know, Del, what you did — when you got the drop on Ken — I think it’s what John Wayne woulda done.”

Chapter 15

Tragic Turquoise

I used to wonder why some people shake cayenne pepper flakes onto their pizza. I tried it, and then I understood. As a kid, I wondered why adults bothered to drink coffee if they had to add milk to make it palatable. Today, I'm all latté. But I draw the line at putting sprinkles on ice cream.

"And so you should," decreed Lucius Tiber, a judicial frieze of blond curls spanning his august forehead. His eyes were wreathed in folds of amusement.

"Gilding the lily," I said.

"Glittering the opal," Lucius seconded.

Sally said, "Well, then, what about chocolate sauce on ice cream?"

"The gods smile upon chocolate," Lucius observed. "It's the exception to every rule about flavor mixing."

"What about butterscotch on ice cream?"

"Gilding," I insisted, "a cheap distraction concocted by the banana split lobby."

"What, you're anti-banana?"

"A banana split has no essence," Lucius agreed. "It's a pile of things that could never occur together except in a trash can, or juvenile imagining."

"I'm in favor of juvenile imagining," I clarified.

"Of course you are, but be aware of its limits. The young do not see the difference between 'more' and 'more interesting.'"

"Where do 'more interesting' combinations come from if not from the young?" Sally

demanded.

“From jesters and fools,” Lucius averred. “There is no other explanation for lemon meringue pie.”

“I always assumed,” Sally said, “that lemon meringue pie was left here by aliens,”

“Meringues, the very peaks of arrogant cuisine,” Lucius propounded, “arose in the 1700s at the court of Louis XV. We’ll never know who he was, the clown below-stairs who had the ass-headed idea of putting whipped egg-white on top of a lemon curd. It was lunacy — the crust, the curd, the toasted whoosh above. Alas, it worked.”

“I’m not sure it works,” I challenged.

“Form a picture in your mind,” suggested Lucius socratically. “Picture lemon meringue pie à la mode.”

There was a stillness, as if atoms of oxygen and nitrogen in the atmosphere had all stopped humming to reconsider their mode of existence.

“It’s impossible,” Lucius resumed. “You cannot put a scoop of ice cream on a meringue like some meteorite through the roof. Lemon meringue pie is perfect exactly as it is, despite being one of the silliest desserts ever invented.”

“Gosh, I wish they had pie here,” Sally said.

We were lunching with Lucius on Ventura Boulevard, at Broups Breads and Soups. Iron chairs and tiny tables next to a trompe l’oeil mural made it feel we were dining al fresco on a winding street in Tangiers. Sally had vegetable barley, Lucius gazpacho, and I clam chowder. I chose the bread, a dark loaf with porter in the dough for a sour tang that made the butter jump.

“What else would you like to know?” Lucius said. “The grapevine has it you’re asking everyone about Ken, Del, and the goings on at RGMS.”

“The McCleggy grapevine,” I said.

“Our club’s unofficial broadcasting service.”

“Did you go on the field trip where Ken died?”

“Yes. I was on the same slope as Ken, twenty feet over, looking for blackish-green skarn. Everybody was collecting for the tortoise mosaic, a club project.”

“Did you see Ken fall?”

“I heard it happen. I got to my feet, looked around. I saw the outcrop he landed on.”

Lucius made a face and shook his head. “I was first to reach him. He had a pulse.”

“Did he say anything, or try to speak?”

“He was dazed. Eyes open but not tracking.”

“Did you hear or see anything that would explain why he lost his footing?”

“Not in the moment. A little before he fell, he was arguing with Del. Del wanted to move on to the next site. Then he argued with Suzette. She called him a snake.”

“What was their argument about?”

“Women suddenly asking to use the big saws. She thought Ken put them up to it.”

“Where was Marianne?”

“Same slope but another twenty feet farther on. She and Shane Grandville were sorting rubble.”

“Who else came down the slope to where Ken was?”

“Ed Bailey, Mike Banks, Mina Blatt, Suzette, Del.” Lucius tipped his head, seeming to study video clips of memory. “Ed brought down a blanket and medical kit. It was a crowded space. Marianne stayed beside Ken. Roy made the 911 call from the top. Heinrich drove back to the canyon road to lead the medics up. It was a couple of hours before they

arrived.”

“A long, hard day, it sounds like,” I said.

“None of us will forget,” Lucius said. “We don’t talk about it.”

“In retrospect, Del seems to have been the one most changed by Ken’s death,” Sally said.

“I would say Marianne was the most changed, but Del has become a different man. Someone pulled the plug on his anger.”

“Does he feel guilty about Ken?”

“I don’t think so. The change in Del came more recently. It was after Ed lambasted him at the meeting, in front of everybody. Del saw what his behavior looked like to others. And I believe he began to see the atrocious waste. It is rare to find people who are whole-hearted, full of energy, eyes focused on getting something done that’s worth a total effort. Del came to understand it could so easily have gone a different way.”

“You were a solid vote with Del’s faction.”

“Yes. My role was to provide wise counsel and support the leader’s plan.”

“Roy Avalone was president of the club, not Del.”

“Think of Roy as the constitutional monarch, a figurehead. Del was prime minister.”

“Did you ever counsel Del in favor of Ken’s ideas?”

“Yes, but never in open session. Online payments, onboarding new members, workshop skills for women — these were all obviously good ideas. But good governance depends less on good policies than it does on the coherence of power. Too much coherence is tyranny. Too little is chaos. Ken understood very well that consensus is lifeblood in a healthy organization.”

“Was consensus possible?” Sally said, “It seems like Del and Ken were locked in the classic struggle of old versus new.”

“Ken was betting the AFMS prize — having the Reseda club recognized as the number-one rockhounding club in the country. Ken thought it was a bright shiny Grail the old-timers could not resist. He assumed, and he wasn’t wrong, that the old generation wants to be thanked and congratulated for their long efforts and achievements.”

“Why didn’t that strategy work?” Sally asked.

“Ah,” said Lucius, laying the flat of his hand on the table, arching his fingers like giant, muscular, Pleistocene crab legs, “we return to the mystery of novel flavor combinations.”

“Ken was offering avocado toast to a generation raised on white bread and margarine,” Sally said.

“Kale will be kale,” agreed Lucius, “even with sugar on top.”

+ + +

In a black-and-white forest, a nymph hid in the shadows as a breathtakingly blue-green Narcissus gazed into a pool. The scene was enlarged and colorized from an 1813 engraving. It filled the back wall of Lucius Tiber’s “Tragic Turquoise” display case. The pool Narcissus gazed into was an almost oceanic spread of turquoise cabochons and pebbles on the case floor. Cards like oars held up by drowning men told where their surrounding blue-green beauties came from.

The range of color approximated that of a backyard swimming pool, with Stormy Mountain and Lone Mountain samples at the deep end. Bisbee turquoise led the transition

to mid-pool blues, while Kingman and Sleeping Beauty were milky with the rising white toward the shallow end. Number 8 and Pilot Mountain went from blue to hinted green. The Carico Lake part of the pool seemed to have gone several weeks without chlorine. At the Royston end, soft blue turned swimming-hole green.

Tragic Turquoise

So beautiful, so crumbly

- Turquoise is a rare mineral.
- Turquoise is porous, losing color and fracturing easily.
- Only 10 percent of turquoise is gem quality.
- “Enhanced” indicates a proprietary treatment (possibly electrical) that reduces porosity and enhances color.
- “Stabilized” means immersed in a glue-like filler.
- “Reconstituted” refers to turquoise that is crushed to powder and molded.
- Enhanced and stabilized treatments are often undetectable without sacrificing a sample.

“In its webbed and greener phases, one can appreciate that turquoise is more akin to lime scale than to hard rock.”

— Lucius Tiber

A couple looking into the “Tragic Turquoise” display case cooed over the colors in

Narcissus' pool.

The gentleman remarked, "If the processed turquoise can't be detected, even by an expert with an eyeglass, I don't see why we should care one way or the other."

"The turquoise in my antique silver bracelet is all Natural," said the lady.

"An enhanced piece should be perfectly suitable for an anniversary gift, I would say."

"Hmm."

+ + +

Sartorially, we were mixed company. Sally was dressed for business meetings in a smartly cut coat and long straight pants, with her ankles exposed momentarily above killer high heels. I wore a Havana-style shirt and jeans with boat shoes. (They drain and dry before you step from the dock to the shore, according to ads.) Lucius sported something like a flowing medical coat over a collarless shirt and loose trousers — all in white but not a brilliant white, a shade more modest, perhaps antique. He would have blended in among the senators who assassinated Julius Caesar.

"How did you know Ken was staying at the Hi Jolly campground?" I asked. "Del said you told him at Quartzsite where to find Ken."

"Oh, I was at the same campground, on the other side. I saw Ken setting up his tent as I pulled in." Lucius glowed, thinking of his silver-bullet trailer. "I have a '69 Airstream, furnished like a room at the Ritz."

"Did you know Marianne would be in Ken's tent?"

Lucius compressed his lips, rolling his eyes toward the ceiling. "I should have

known, but I didn't. Anyone could see there were sparks between Marianne and Ken. They didn't pretend indifference or become suddenly secretive, as you would expect if they had taken the big step beyond flirtation. On that Friday, I saw Marianne with Hector and Linda. I assumed they were all staying together."

"And it was Hector," Sally said, "who told you after Quartzsite that Del had caught Marianne at Ken's tent. And it was you who then told the McCleggys, who spread the story to everyone in the club."

"How could you possibly know that?" Lucius beamed.

"She makes lists," I said.

"Amazing. Please tell me about this list."

"Two lists," Sally said. "The first list was people who knew that Del caught Sally at the Hi Jolly campground. It's a short list: Del, Sally, and Ken. Del swears he told no one. If we take him at his word, that leaves Marianne and Ken. Ken came to Del afterward, hoping to keep the matter secret. That leaves Marianne. Marianne told Linda, but Linda wanted to keep it all secret as much as Marianne did. There was another person in the car. Hector was not asleep."

"Brilliant, I must say. Now the second list."

"The second list was people Hector might talk to. He knew Marianne was hurt. He understood that telling her secret to anyone could lead to drastic consequences. If he needed to talk, Hector would have gone to someone he thought he could trust."

"Oh, dear, this is going to make me look very bad."

"If the shoe fits," Sally said. "Scanning the adults of RGMS with a Hector-like eye, you were conspicuous — worldly, not a prude, not married, something of an oddball. You would

understand what it was like, not fitting the norm.”

“Unconventional reasoning, but you hit the mark. In fact, Hector and I had already talked a few times about Marianne. He wanted to put his feelings into words, hear them spoken in someone’s presence. He wanted to know, did I agree she was the most beautiful woman I had ever met? At times, Hector was in despair. I told him that’s how it was in Great Unrequited Loves. Dante and Beatrice, Cyrano and Roxanne, Gatsby and Daisy. The hero’s only choice is to experience it, feel his hopeless love fully, and glory in its heat — despite the icy grip of Destiny.”

“Not the advice a guidance counselor would give,” Sally said.

“Suffering purifies the soul,” Lucius said, “according to Dostoyevsky.”

A solemnity descended on our party. The little bread basket lay empty. The soup bowls had flown away like friends from long ago.

“Lucius, I don’t understand,” I said. “Clearly, you remember what it’s like to be a teenager. How could you betray his confidence to the McCleggy’s?”

“Despicable weakness,” Lucius admitted. “The secret was like an unspent casino token in my pocket. I never made a decision to give it away. I merely heard the story coming out of my mouth. James McCleggy’s eyes grew big as saucers. That part was enjoyable. In the same moment, I could hear dominoes falling far away. Ken and Marianne suddenly naked to the world. Roy sitting alone, the shades of well-meaning friends pressing all around his loneliness. Hector on fire with guilt. In days afterward, I thought about ways to try to make amends. There was no remedy. And no one thought I was to blame. Everyone made the reasonable inference that the story came from Del Musselman, There was nothing to be done.”

"Dostoyevsky would not agree," Sally said.

"I am weak. Years of damning evidence litter the roadside of my life. I don't feel as bad about it as I used to." Lucius gazed into the crown of his panama hat. "I am good company. You must admit that much. I hope you'll invite me to lunch again."

We assured him we would.

Chapter 16

San Gabriels Gold

Remembering that Ed Bailey welcomed company when scouting field trips, I gave him a call. He told me to bring a lunch and wear hiking boots, in case of rock climbing. We would be checking a site near Mt. Baldy for lapis lazuli. Lapis is a rare azure rock, the color of summer nights in ancient Egypt.

“We’ll have to walk overland a little and down a creek,” Ed said. “Nothing dangerous, but it could be an adventure.”

Ed’s house was a typical 1960s four-bedroom on the North Side, where Reseda transitioned to slightly silkier Northridge. All the houses on Ed’s block had the same windows, with muntins arranged in diamond-shapes and false shutters nailed open on either side. Front yards had proved more expressive over the years. Ed’s was a traditional mix of shrubs and grass, neatly trimmed and green enough to pass for decent — the more so because more ragged examples drooped up and down the street. A cactus garden two doors down showed that a water-conserving yard did not have to be ugly, mixing heights and shapes of plantings among paths and rock borders. Across the street, an all-gravel yard with circles for saplings insisted that a water-conserving yard did have to be ugly.

The 10-year-old pickup truck in Ed’s driveway was vaguely blue. The paint was impulsively pin-striped by spiny shrubs. The driver-side door and bed-wall seemed to have taken direct hits from a rock bazooka.

I walked to the front door and rang. Marie Bailey answered. She wore an apron. “You must be Romeo. Come in for coffee and fresh baked cinnamon rolls — mmm.”

Marie used aaah, oooh, and mmm sounds like a musical accompaniment to talking. She had two dots for eyes, and her hair flew in all directions, like cats from a loud noise. Sure enough, on a pony wall by the kitchen were a half-dozen cinnamon rolls cooling on racks, waiting for the icing to set.

“Ed tells me Romeo is your real name.”

“My mother was a believer in true love.”

“Aaah. Are you a believer in true love?”

“I swear by the moon, I am.”

“Me too,” Marie cooed. “So how do I — errrck — ask this without seeming ... Eeeyuh.

Is it true you think Ken’s death was a crime of passion?”

“If passion means anger, I think it’s possible.”

“I mean the passion of love gone wrong.” Marie lowered her voice. “I mean jealousy.”

“You lost me. Who was jealous?”

“What if Ken was untrue.”

“Let’s back up. When did you find out Ken was having an affair with Marianne?”

“Everybody knew, after Quartzsite.”

“You think Marianne might have killed Ken, because Ken was untrue to her.”

“If not Marianne, the other woman did it.”

“The other woman. Do you have someone in mind?”

“I don’t know,” Marie said. “That karma woman maybe.”

“What makes you think there was another woman?”

“You know, I just got that vibe from Ken. Errrck. Like he was passionate? But also up to something.”

"Millie Zhang?" I said. "Coral Finchum, Margot Arrete..."

"Not Coral."

"Not Coral because she's religious?"

"Not Coral because she's got Soapy."

"We're speaking of Coral with the Chihuahua. And Soapy Stovall, the skinny propector."

"Mmm-hmmm," Marie intoned.

She dropped the subject like a dutch oven as Ed came into the kitchen. He said, "Lucky you, Romeo. Marie made cinnamon rolls."

Marie brought out plates, paper napkins, and forks. The cinnamon rolls were wider across than donuts, raising the question of silverware. Ed tucked in two-handed.

We took the 118 east to the 210, running alongside the San Gabriel Mountains. At the far end of the San Gabriels stood Mt. San Antonio, also known as Mt. Baldy. Ed liked that area for a summer field trip, he said, the mountains being kindlier than the desert from June to September. Rock collecting in the Mt. Baldy Wilderness Preserve was allowed with a permit.

Lapis was a longshot. The only known outcrop of lapis lazuli in California was up a steep slope in Cascade Canyon, out of reach for nearly all RGMS members. However, Ed had heard of a cabinet-sized boulder shot through with blue seams. A drunken braggart swore the boulder stood high and dry near a certain creek. Ed thought it was worth a look.

The drive was about an hour and a half. We passed the time talking over the news on the radio. The mountains were a high green wall to the left. Pasadena and its more hard-

pressed relations spread westward on our right. At Irwindale, we passed a complex of cement works, pipelines, and storage tanks that took charge of the San Gabriel River. On the other side of the captive river, tall vats painted like a six-pack of beer hailed freeway drivers. Route 39 snuck under the freeway, heading upriver into the mountains.

"Soapy Stovall's favorite stomping grounds up there," Ed said.

"There's gold mining in the San Gabriels?"

"Not anymore. In the 1800s and early 1900s, there were several mines. The Big Horn, the Montecristo, the Dawn Mine. They all played out before anyone saw real profits. Steep terrain, limited water supply — the costs were overwhelming. The work was dangerous. Whenever I need to stay awake, I picture myself driving a mule team with a wagon-load of ore down one of those old roads."

"Does Soapy find gold up there?"

"The Forest Service doesn't allow prospecting in this part of the mountains, not even panning. Downstream, in Azusa, there's a gravel pit that sifts reportable amounts of gold dust from river sediments year after year. In the old days, there was a mining camp up there, on the East Fork. Maybe three hundred miners, sluicing enough gold to keep at it. A flood washed them out in 1862."

"So there's gold dust still coming down the river."

"A man afflicted with the gold bug, like Soapy, can't stop thinking about the lode up there. It's gotta be somewhere, shedding flakes of gold every time the rains come."

"Are Soapy Stovall and Coral Finchum an item?"

"Not to my direct knowledge," Ed said. "People talk."

"Do they go out together in public?"

"I heard they went bowling."

There are two bowling alleys in Reseda, both attached to motels. Lovers' lanes, you just never know.

"Did you know before Quartzsite that Ken and Marianne were together?"

"I didn't notice anything in particular."

"Ken didn't talk with you about Marianne."

"No," Ed said. "If he had, I couldn't have taken his side — not if I knew he might destroy us."

+ + +

Setting out to make his fortune, alone in the wilderness, hoping to return to society one day a rich man, living a life of hard work and privation until that happy time to come, with no guarantee he will succeed, but trusting in his luck — the lonely life of a prospector was the theme of Soapy Stovall's display case. It showed the inside of a miner's cabin, with a window on the back wall looking down a forested canyon. In the distance, the towers of downtown Los Angeles poked through the brownish gray air.

On a weathered plank under the window, a pouch half full of glitter lay in a prospector's pan. A set of weights in ounces stood by a seesaw scale. There was pulverized rock in a test tube, paired with a 19th century test kit for silver: a pint bottle of Hypo Soda (sodium thiosulfate) and a small bottle of Calcine (of lime and sulfur).

At the end of the shelf, a high school yearbook photo recalled the ideal the miner dreamed of returning to. Her hair was lustrous, her eyes lit with eager expectation. *I can*

hardly wait to see how my life turns out.

Below the shelf, the floor of the cabin was littered with odds and ends of bachelor living: a can of no-name coffee, one pull-on leather boot, a folding mess kit, a worn deck of cards, an empty bottle of Old Joe Clark...

+ + +

From the Base Line exit, we took Mt. Baldy Road seven miles north and 3,000 feet up. The temperature fell 15 degrees. We broke through the haze layer, and the ratio of pine trees to people shot up like the canyon walls around us. At the junction with the old Barrett-Stoddard Truck Route, Ed parked the truck, and we followed a trail that began as a road into Cascade Canyon. We passed a handful of cabins and slipped around a gate that kept vehicles off the trail.

Ed knelt to pick a rock out of a slide of rubble. He eyed it and let it drop.

"After Quartzsite, the whispering about Ken and Marianne... It changed the way people thought about the club. Sex is sexier than rocks, no doubt. When people got their RGMS newsletter, they thought about the editor sneaking off to meet her lover, and her husband alone at home with his books. When they thought about the next workshop, they wondered what spicy new details they might hear. We were more of a soap opera than a rock club."

"If Ken turned out to be bad for the club, why did you force the showdown with Del?"

"Ken was sincere. He had ideas. I liked him. It was a bad turn of events, his getting

involved with Marianne — like the stumble that sets off an avalanche. But such things happen. Then the mess after Quartzsite ... brought out the worst in Del. He was like an irritable old man threatening to cut everybody out his will. Del was making a bad situation worse. It was up to me to make him stop.”

“What’s next for RGMS then?”

“I expect the unexpected,” Ed said. “Maybe you’d like to be vice-president.”

I pointed out I was not a rockhound.

“You’re Luis Regalo’s nephew. The Board would make you Prince of Wales if you asked. No? Well, then, look for rocks with dark red jellybeans embedded. They’re rubies.”

“Rubies, no kidding?”

I raked through the slide of rubble by the trail using a fallen branch, boisterously at first, then more deliberately. Ed looked around the rocks like a hunter who is wise in the ways of the hunted. He picked up a softball-sized rock and held it out for my inspection. Dark red jellybeans bulged from the surface, eight in all.

“Are these rubies worth a lot?”

“I shouldn’t have called them rubies. They’re not gem quality. They’re corundum, which is still quite noteworthy to a mineralogist. Ruby sounds more exciting.”

“The conundrum of corundum,” I said.

“This one slope right here is the most interesting in all the San Gabriel Mountains for a mineralogist. This is the only place in these mountains where you find corundum. Lapis is even more rare. These are metamorphic rocks, transformed from ordinary sediment by surges of granite from below, with incredible heat and pressure, dissolving the old, bringing forth the new. Like alchemy.”

“Just this one slope,” I said. “Not on the other side of the mountain, not on the mountain behind us.”

“In 150 years of greedy searching by prospectors, this is the only site where the geology was just right for lapis lazuli. The nearest other site is in Colorado.”

With Ed’s gesture up the slope, it was evident why we would not be taking field trips to the lapis mine above. The soil and rock were loose, steep, and tangled with living and dead underbrush. A miner back in the 1920s bored a tunnel 15 feet into the outcrop. He took as much lapis as he readily could, and it was not enough to pay for digging the tunnel. Since then, the hardest and most determined seekers have picked through the remains, never finding another seam of the magic blue color.

“This is enough for me,” Ed said, knocking a corner off the rock with jellybeans. He handed the rest to me. “Here’s something to remember the day by.”

“Thank you, Ed. I have one more question about Ken.”

“Shoot.”

“When you went down to where Ken fell, with the medical kit and blanket, did he say anything? What did you notice?”

Ed looked into his memory, focusing on a parade of images somewhere over my shoulder. “Ken tried to talk, nothing I understood. He was very pale, with a faint, rapid pulse. He was cold, so I wrapped the blanket on him. Marianne was cradling his head. Lucius looked stricken.”

Returning to the bazooka’d blue pickup, we drove a little farther up Mt. Baldy Road to a trailhead I am not at liberty to name. We followed the trail to a creek and turned downstream. It was slow, careful going for a while, over a terrain of mixed rocks, some

worn smooth by water and some freshly rolled to the canyon floor. We were looking for a rock slide where our reference peak was visible in the ten o'clock position. We found such a slide, and then we found the two-ton pear-shaped boulder with seams of magic blue.

Ed took a photo and chipped samples from six areas. He put them in sandwich bags labeled A through F. He said, "There's no way this boulder rolled upstream."

"I have to agree. What conclusion do you draw from this observation?"

"If this proves to be lapis," he said, "it must have come from an outcrop nobody knows about yet."

Chapter 17

Diorite Dice

Roy Avalone called the meeting of the Reseda Gem and Mineral Society to order. Sally and I sat in the same row as before and the same seats. Most RGMS members seemed to have habitual seats. Where you sit reflects where you stand in a group — as any sociologist can tell you, or anyone who eats in a school cafeteria. To my left sat Roz McCleggy. On Sally's right was James McCleggy. If Sally or I had a scrap of news for the grapevine, the McCleggys were in position to hear it first.

Roy Avalone was the one who had news.

"I'm happy to announce we have a new chair for the Annual Show," Roy declared from the podium. His voice was back to full strength, thanks to a few weeks of rest and good wishes from many kind members. He spoke in the glowing but measured tones of public television. "Our new Show chair is a long-time member of the club and important contributor to past shows. Her experience includes a term as co-chair of the show three years ago."

"Oh, God, no," groaned James McCleggy.

"Please help me welcome her to this key role for the club — Margot Arrete." Roy clapped to start a round of applause.

"Is she as bad as all that?" I asked Roz with a nod toward James, whose hands covered his face.

"She's a little pushy. Loud. Full of herself," Roz said. "I like her."

"So James is overreacting," I said.

"A little."

"And I guess this means Del is really out."

"Really, really out," Roz agreed, "at least as far as the show is concerned. Margot is Del's ex-wife."

Margot strode to the front and stood beside Roy. She declined the microphone. Margot was as good as any opera singer at making herself heard in the back row. Her platinum hair hung like a pair of floppy wings on a helmet.

"Can you hear me in back?" she demanded. "Raise your hand if you hear me."

Hands flew up.

"Good. I want to first say thank you, because I'm going to need your help — every one of you — in making our next show a success. Volunteer early, while we have spaces on the team you're interested in, whether it's information table, raffle, kids activities, or setup and teardown..."

Margot pointed to the back of the room. Bangles clattered on her wrist. "There's a signup sheet on the Display Table."

"I'll join the Navy," James McCleggy said, shaking his head in dramatized woe. "I'll join the Peace Corps."

"You're too cantankerous for the Peace Corps," Roz said.

"Don't wait to sign up," Margot commanded. "Don't make me come to your house."

"I'll join the Foreign Legion."

Roy had another new appointment to announce, for vice-president. The office had been vacant for some months, Roy said, due to the tragic death of the previous officeholder. He did not mention Ken Tanaka by name. Roy said he had given long thought to finding a

successor who could not only fill the interim term but also stand for a full term at the next election. One member stood out, both for his accomplishments in the club and managing a local business.

I wondered if Roy had somehow talked Uncle Luis into stepping in as vice-president. It made no sense as a business move for Uncle Luis, but my uncle is nothing if not quixotic.

"Please join me in congratulating our new vice-president, Will Meyer," Roy said.

Behind us someone whispered, "Who?"

Will Meyer came forward to wavering applause. He was a man of less than average height and a little more than average weight. He kept his hands folded even when standing. Neither slack nor dynamic, his posture proclaimed he was quiet and polite. I wondered if his folded hands were inculcated at Catholic school. The nuns at my school were strict, not only about what you did but about what you might be thinking of doing.

"Thank you," Will Meyer said, "so much. Some of you may not know me yet. A few will know me, I hope, from my gem trees."

A tingle of recognition flickered through the audience: *Oh, the gem trees guy.*

Applause for the gem trees swelled to a standing ovation.

"Believe me, I'm as surprised as you," Will Meyer said. "There is so much for me to learn about being vice-president. I will do my best for you, especially in lining up speakers who are informative and enjoyable to listen to. Thank you for this opportunity."

Will Meyer took a seat in the front row. As his applause subsided, Roz said to me, "Will Meyer. You could knock me over with a feather."

No one could do any such thing to Roz McCleggy, I thought. She was sturdy as a fire plug.

"Which appointment surprises you more, Margot for Show chair or Will for vice-president?"

"Margot was co-chair for one show. She left a bad taste in everybody's mouth. On the other hand, Margot is the one person apart from Del with recent experience managing the show. She's a sensible choice."

"And Will Meyer?"

"I can't imagine a personality more opposite to Ken Tanaka."

"That may have been the idea," I said. "I'm beginning to think Roy has rung the bell with both of his new appointments."

"Here's something to think about," Roz said. "As Show chair, Margot gets a seat on the Board. With Del gone, the old-timers voting bloc goes down to four. Without him to lead the charge, it's not clear the others will still vote together."

"Interesting," I said.

"I wonder if Margot will resurrect some of Ken's reform proposals." Sally leaned across me, keeping her voice low. "Margot was vocal about women learning to use the big saws."

"Is the merchant marine still around?" James McCleggy wondered aloud. "Maybe I could sign up for that."

At the podium, Roy got on with the regular business of an RGMS meeting. Millie Zhang reported minor changes to financial results from the annual show. Coral Finchum rose mightily from a continent of surrounding chairs to report 35 members present and three guests. She invited the guests to stand for warm applause.

Then Roy called on Ed Bailey for a Field Trips report. Ed walked a hiking pace to the

front, as the room recalled his speech at the last meeting, the momentous denunciation of Del.

"You may remember, I said last month I might have to step down as Field Trips chair." Ed paused, considering how things might have gone. "As it turns out, there will be no need to make a change. I will stay on and continue to lead field trips."

A surge of applause rose from the audience. People were glad to still have their Ed Bailey as a venerable club elder.

"I want to acknowledge Del Musselman, who has been honorable in a difficult situation. I consider him my friend. There's every reason for all of us to pull together."

Ed gestured for Del to stand. Del was in a middle seat, far from the front row. He waved briefly to appreciative applause, and sat down.

"I have good news from scouting a trip last week," Ed continued. "We found a good-size boulder in a canyon near Mt. Baldy. This boulder has got multiple seams of blue, which might be lapis lazuli. I sent samples to a gemologist I know from way back. If he confirms the material is lapis..."

Ed swept the audience with a grin and nod. "We are all members of a very lucky rock club. We could be cabbing King Tut's favorite gemstone for Christmas presents this year. Stay tuned."

Ed yielded the floor to Suzette Sanger.

Suzette, too, had a surprise announcement.

"Ladies!" she whooped with a wide fling of rubbery arms, "driving a car is more complicated and more dangerous than cutting slabs on a big saw. Why are men having all the fun with my big saws at the workshop? Time for a change, wouldn't you say? I am going

to give a ladies-only demonstration on the 24-inch saws this weekend. If you're ready to rip some rock and be your own woman, come on down to the workshop!"

+ + +

Margot Arrete, credentialed member and past president of the Southern California Jewelry Arts Teachers Association, titled her display case "Diorite Dice: Toward Sustainable Rockhounding and Lapidary."

Problem

Rockhounding sites have been picked clean as a crab shell on the beach.

Solution

Discover the beauty in rocks that are not rare. Rocks are everywhere — under our houses, bulging from mountains, pooling the oceans. Ordinary rocks form the pillars, vaults, and galleries of the most marvelous planet ever built.

Farewell, shiny and tiny gemstones.

Hello, rough and ready rocks!

Margot's display case showed non-gem jewelry in five categories. The categories were based on the forces that gave stones their shape.

Plutonic Rock

To represent rocks that cooled underground, never seeing the light of day until water and

wind dug them out, Margot designed **Diorite Dice Earrings**. The explanatory card read:

The black spots in diorite are slow-cooled crystals of magnesium- and iron-rich hornblende. Spots on these dice are random, going around corners like checks on a tablecloth. These are dice that roll in dreams. The diorite is from a roadcut on Highway 2.

Erupted Rock

A rock that oozed from a hole in the earth near Hinckley, and another that flew out of a volcano on the far side of Barstow, came together in the **Basalt Brooch with Pumice**.

The slithering, S-shaped god Quetzalcoatl wears a feathery headdress of air-pocked pumice. The brooch pin sticks out at the tip from the serpent's mouth like a golden tongue. For evening wear and formal occasions.

Tabular Rock

Layers of loose sediment compressed into sheets of rock, known as shale, found their artistic destiny in Margot's **Petrolic Pendant**.

Forty-eight tiny holes drilled in a dark brown square of shale trace the outline of an oil well pump jack (also known as a nodding donkey). The holes are filled with contrasting white gypsum. Shale from Palos Verdes Estates, gypsum from Tick Canyon (Agua Dulce).

Eroded Rock

Weathered rocks found their jewelry form in Margot's **Beach Blanket Bangle**, a charm bracelet cored from a smooth knob of rhyolite (cemented volcanic ash). Chips of schist dangled from the bangle but only on one side, causing the bracelet to rotate and clatter with any motion of the wrist. The dangling chips pointed true as any compass to the center of the earth.

Broken rock rolls downriver to an ocean, where it tumbles for years in sand and salt water. It takes on the shape of a good skipping stone — a flattened oval. Why? A disk is the result of ebb, flow, and drag in tides of time.

Urban Rock

The uses of stone are many in a city. Streets and sidewalks consume unimaginable amounts of crushed rock, known as aggregate. Pavement repairs in Long Beach inspired Margot to create the **Ring Road Ring**.

This 150-carat plug of tarmac is emerald-cut in a four-prong setting. Highlights on the speckled upper face are centerline yellow. Accessorize for street takeovers or any occasion with short skirts and heavy boots.

+ + +

At the mid-meeting break, the McCleggys scrambled like jets on a flight deck — Roz to get details from the new Show chair, James to quiz the new vice-president. Sally and I went looking for Marianne. She hadn't sought us out when we arrived. What was up with our new-member guide?

"I was interviewing the new vice-president for the newsletter," Marianne said. "How are you guys doing?"

We said we were keeping busy.

"Especially you, Romeo. I keep hearing about your 'investigation.' Are you investigating?"

"A couple of visitors stopped by — Millie and later Coral. Then I had a chance to talk with Doris and Del and Soapy, moving her saw to the workshop. Sally and I had lunch with Lucius. Put them all together, it quacks like an investigation."

"Have you come to any conclusions?"

"One clear finding so far. The club's leaders are scared to death of what I might say to Uncle Luis."

"He's the financial pillar of the club," Marianne said. "We couldn't afford a workshop without his dollar-a-year building."

Marianne took a breath and squared her shoulders to ask the question she didn't want to ask. "Do you believe Ken's death was something other than an accident?"

"I don't know."

"You think it's possible Ken was murdered."

"Ed deserves the credit for putting it that way. I only asked why everyone was so tight-lipped. Ed told the Board that Luis Regalo's nephew was asking questions. Presto, Del resigned. Makes you wonder."

"You'll keep investigating?"

"I'd like to know what happened to Ken."

"I'm glad," Marianne said. "You would have been friends."

Marianne took another breath.

"Something you should know," she said. "Soapy Stovall threatened Ken."

"Really. What kind of threat?"

"He told Ken to stop making trouble or he would get a whoopin', a real bad whoopin'."

"That was colorful."

"He said if Ken didn't watch out, he could end up at the bottom of an abandoned mine shaft."

"How did Ken react?"

"He said he wasn't worried. He said Soapy had seen too many old movies."

"The mine shaft is rather specific."

"I thought so too."

"I wonder if threatening Ken was Soapy's idea, or did someone put him up to it."

"Ken said it wouldn't have come from Del. Del was man enough to make his own threats. He thought Soapy might have been trying to impress Del."

"What if Coral Finchum was the one who wanted to frighten Ken?" Sally asked.

"Coral?" Marianne gaped.

"From time to time, they go bowling," Sally said.

Sally and I saw Marianne trying to picture Soapy and Coral together, the stringy miner and the towering Baptist.

"Are you sure? Where did you get this?"

"They've known each other since high school," I said, "according to Ed Bailey."

"Bowling?"

"There's nothing sexier than bowling," Sally crooned. "Feel the power of the rolling ball, the tumbling of your pins."

"Oh, baby," Marianne said.

"You are my lucky strike, Coral honey," croaked Sally.

Sally and Marianne had veered into girls-giggle world.

Then Roz McCleggy appeared, as if drawn by pings of radar. Wide-eyed, she asked, "What am I missing?"

"Soapy and Coral," Marianne blurted. "Did you know?"

Roz threw her arms around herself. Looking up as if to a heavenly light, she cried, "Oh, Coral, mine. I'll be thy faithful shaft."

I faded irrelevantly to the Display Table. There was a chunk of purple amethyst standing upright like a donkey ear. There were loose pieces of jade from British Columbia, brought in by Doris Drusenberg. Septarian nodules from Utah lay in an arc like explosion graphics in a Road Runner cartoon.

Will Meyer was thanking well-wishers and promising to do his best.

I said to Suzette Sanger, "That was quite a surprise, your ladies-only demonstration at the workshop."

Suzette wobbled her head, so the tip of her nose drew a full circle.

"If you can't beat 'em," she said, "you best join 'em."

Chapter 18

Sabaku-ishi

Sandra Shore, I guessed, had no women friends. As she took the podium, her swishy skirt was a walking advertisement of thrusting hips. Her peasant blouse offered her breasts like fruit in a summer market. She wore her hair in two coiled braids interlaced with red ribbon. She might have been a wench on her way to the Middle Ages.

“Ran off to Mexico with a homeopathic healer,” Roz whispered in my ear, “leaving a husband and two school-age children behind.”

I widened my eyes to show I was shocked.

Roz nodded categorically, *Some people*.

“Years ago, as a project manager at ESG,” Sandra Shore began, “I was solving problems, meeting deadlines. I was so left-brain I had no time for anything, even the gym. Much less meditation.”

Sandra Shore, I realized, was the woman who argued with Suzette about her badge at the workshop.

“So when Ken Tanaka asked me to give a talk about *suiseki*, I told him straight out, rockhounds wouldn’t be interested. Rockhounds love digging, cutting, polishing. They are active, not contemplative. That’s what I said to Ken Tanaka. And do you know what he said to me?”

It was not a rhetorical question. Sandra waited for an answer. The room was silent, except for the whirr of minds processing the mention of Ken Tanaka’s name — or maybe that was just the air conditioning. The moment grew to its fullness under Sandra Shore’s

infinite gaze.

Her patience was rewarded.

“Ken told you not to underestimate rockhounds. Rockhounds know the beauty of the desert.” It was Marianne, sitting next to Sally, stepping in as hostess to keep a lull at her party from spreading.

“That’s exactly what he said. Don’t underestimate our rockhounds. They have seen the vastness of the desert and the dark mountains, as near and as far away as forever. A desert vista — that is the essence of how we do *suiseki* in California.”

Sandra nodded to the audience, her smile beatific, as if she could see auras like a tumble of rainbows above our heads.

“Soapy, the cart please.”

Soapy Stovall appeared from a side door, pushing a mail cart. Atop the cart was a scarf over something that might have been a good-sized rabbit. Soapy parked the cart by the podium. With a slight bow he said “ma’am” and backed away, pinching the imagined brim of a cowboy hat he was not actually wearing.

I turned for a look at Coral. She had no reaction to Soapy’s bowing and scraping. He might have been a dog barking at a crow for all she cared.

Sandra continued, “In Japanese, stones that can be contemplated as works of art are called *suiseki*. The artist is Nature. The stone is a miniature landscape. The landscape is typically not dramatic or colorful, like a Bierstadt painting with storms and towering peaks. It’s more like a black and white photo, taken at dawn in the High Sierra... What is that photographer’s name?”

“Ansel Adams.” It was James McCleggy.

Roz shot him a look.

“Ansel Adams, yes. When you look at an Ansel Adams photo, you feel stillness and clarity. This is very like *suiseki*. However, a difference is: with Ansel Adams, there is an abundance of detail that you see all at once. In *suiseki*, awareness of detail comes in stages. The stone might at first seem plain and uninteresting, a mountain in the distance. Appreciating its simplicity, the viewer goes on to notice variety and complexity — for example, in the proportions of different parts, or the directions of crossing lines. Underneath it all, the viewer feels wholeness and harmony.”

With a snap, Sandra Shore pulled the scarf off the stone on the cart. She had not over-promised. The stone was dull, a plug-ugly blob like many you see near Pisgah Crater. Appreciating its simplicity, I grokked it to be like a cinnamon jelly bean that was lumpy at one end.

“A *suiseki* invites a second look,” insisted Sandra Shore, her hands approaching as if to caress the blob. “It does this by means of asymmetry. Asymmetry creates tension, raises a question, sends the mind in search of balance. What asymmetry do you notice in this *suiseki*? How about you, Will?”

Will Meyer stood, hands folded in front of him. “The asymmetry I notice first is the slope on one side is steep while the opposite slope is tapering gently.”

“The difference is striking, now that you point it out.” Sandra looked around the audience. “Anyone else?”

“There are three peaks,” Del volunteered, without standing, “all different sizes.”

“Are the sizes randomly different, or are they in some kind of order?”

“It appears to me the second peak is a little more than half as tall as the first. The

third is a little more than half as tall as the second,” Del said. “The two smaller ones together might add up to the height of the tall peak.”

“That’s the golden ratio!” exclaimed Hector Pradera, on his feet. “The golden ratio is a pattern seen in art worldwide and throughout nature — in the spirals of snail shells.”

Linda Pradera, gripping Hector’s forearm, brought the boy back down to his seat.

“The three peaks form a triangle,” Shane Grandville said. He was the artist, a mosaic maker, responsible for the “Desert Tortoise” display case. Marianne turned to see him when Shane spoke. “The triangle of the three peaks has the same general shape as each of the individual mountains, steep on one side, tapered on the other.”

“There is unity,” Hector cried out, his porcupine hair just visible above the sea of audience heads.

“This is how we experience *suiseki*,” Sandra said, her arms wide to embrace the audience, “accumulating details and filling in the story they tell.”

She turned again toward the cart, her skirt swirling and whipping back. She made a lifting gesture, as if she wanted the rock to rise and float in the air.

“Now suppose, instead of a Distant Mountain stone, we had a Near Mountain stone. Instead of smooth surfaces, we could see texture — perhaps a stippling, which might suggest a forest. In a Near Mountain Stone, we might be able to see features such as a jagged ravine or a vein of quartz, like a stream finding a path to the foot of the mountain. The stream might traverse back and forth like a switchback trail, or it might charge down and plunge from a cliff. Waterfalls are a favorite feature in *suiseki*. Imagine a seasonal waterfall. In dry months, ragged edges of erosion are exposed at the pour point. You see a long, smooth drop, minus the water in freefall. Or the falling water might take a zigzag

route, rebounding from one outcrop to another, crashing at last into a basin where the water foams and pools and continues on its journey to the sea. This is *suiseki*, a contemplation of an abstract sculpture, carved by Nature.”

Sandra Shore retrieved her scarf from the cart. She draped it over the stone, as if putting it to bed. Looking left and right for something misplaced, Sandra walked off to the side door and disappeared. The door stood open. The audience wondered whether it was time to applaud. Sandra returned, waving a remote control. “Here it is!”

Back at the podium, Sandra said, “The stones sculpted by Nature are not always abstract. Sometimes they refer very recognizably to places, objects, or even people. A patch of white quartz may suggest a snow-capped peak. The peak may look a lot like Mt. Fuji or, in California, Mt. Shasta.”

Sandra’s first slide showed side-by-side views of Mt. Shasta and a congruently triangular stone with a white quartz peak. The stone came from a beach 200 miles west of Mt. Shasta. It sat in a custom-fitted wooden tray, a seat of honor.

The second slide showed side-by-side views of Half Dome in Yosemite National Park and a similarly split ball of granite, lugged home from the Panamint Mountains. The slightly dished face of the *suiseki* mirrored the mind-breaking cliff on the postcard-famous mountain.

“A mathematician might see the mini-Half Dome and the mini-Shasta as fractals,” Sandra said, “or examples of universal forms existing at different orders of magnitude. A philosopher might see a one-ness that permeates Creation. Or perhaps these *suiseki* are bits of evidence — proving the existence of parallel universes, inhabited by beings we know nothing about.”

The stone in the third slide seemed to show a hut on a hillside. In the fourth slide, a strong man bent to his work at an anvil. The fifth slide showed a smoothed, rounded rock decorated with chrysanthemum petals — daubed by Nature, using minerals as paint.

“*Suiseki* can be pictorial, just like our picture jaspers — which, when you think about it, are landscape paintings buried in an Oregon landscape that happens to look a lot like the buried landscape paintings. Very Zen, all that.

“You may have guessed, Buddhist ideas were a strong influence in the development of *suiseki*. The tradition originated in China more than a thousand years ago. The Chinese *gongshi* spread to Korea as *suseok* and to Japan as *suiseki*.

“In the 1960s, the Japanese tradition caught on in California. Certain rock types and landforms of the Southwest were so distinctive and expressive they spurred the creation of a new *suiseki* category — *sabaku-ishi*, or Desert Stone. Picture a giant mesa or a vaulted cathedral, carved from sandstone by water and wind. Picture a lonely tower, standing guard for thousands of years, and you have the ideal of *sabaku-ishi*.”

Sandra turned to the mail cart and pinched the scarf covering the rock. She called out magic words, “*Suiseki, sabaku-ishi!*” She flicked the scarf away.

“Behold, a Desert Stone.”

The cinnamon jelly bean had disappeared. In its place stood a foot-high slab of Navajo sandstone, like the conning tower of a submarine, emerging from a canyon floor. It was a miniature of Angels Landing in Zion National Park.

+ + +

Angels Landing posed boldly in the “Sabaku-ishi” display case by Sandra Shore — as an embodiment of yang power. A northeast-pointing hummock at the base of the monolith thrust without shame into a bow of the Virgin River. The river was a sinuous course of smoky quartz. The *daiza*, or fitted wooden platform, had a taller than customary rim, an ovolo of polished cottonwood, expressing the yin of the enclosing legs of Zion Canyon.

The broad shoulders of the monolith were a study in carved-out solitude, keeping others at a respectful distance, the loneliness of kingship. The chiseled blocks of the torso came together at jutting angles, throwing shadows over old wounds, hinting at chasms torn to depths past knowing. A skirt of fallen rubble and soil surrounded the hero, like the *haidate*, or thigh armor, of a samurai.

A dedication, painted on an ivory card, read simply:

for Michael

Many visitors to the RGMS show recognized Angels Landing from family vacations. Some wondered who Michael was.

“Michael the archangel?” wondered a woman in cat’s eyeglasses and a fuzzy pink cardigan.

“It was Michael Spitzrath,” said Roz, who happened to be there, “an herbal healer now living in Acapulco.”

+ + +

The following day, Sally and I took a late-afternoon walk. The sun glared murderously from the end of every westward street, so we chose a northward route. Hamish led the way up Vanalden Avenue. Sally had favorite houses, to which we zigged a block sideways as needed and then zagged back to Vanalden. There was a prim cottage with an orange tree trimmed to a perfect sphere — a picture postcard of the good life in Southern California circa 1935. On the next block was a renegade grapefruit tree, its branches reaching over a neighbor's fence, dropping pale, undersized, squishy balls onto the driveway and sidewalk. I picked up a couple for juice. And then there was a casa with a tiled deck, like a front porch but set aside in the yard, with two chairs and a café table amid tall cacti and Spanish bayonet. A climbing bush — or a vine that thought it was a tree — bore fruit like abbreviated bananas. "Ah," sighed Sally, "tropical Reseda."

I liked Vanalden for its jumble of old cars — parked forever, hoping one day to be lovingly restored. A spavined VW bus rested on its axles by a constipated garage. A 1968 Dodge Monaco station wagon went on longer than a yellow light. A Chevrolet Corvair, judged unsafe at any speed in 1965, was still cute as a clip from *My Favorite Martian*.

For Hamish, the headline attraction on Vanalden was Honey's house. Honey was an eponymously colored bulldog who always came out to say hello. She barked furiously at any other dog who broached her territory, which included the far side of the street. Honey and Hamish met nose to nose at the chain-link fence, like Pyramus and Thisbe.

"What do you suppose she sees in Hamish?" I asked.

"Beats me," Sally said, "but he's a lucky dog."

"Hamish is the lucky one, not Honey?"

"Yes, you clueless man."

"You know Hamish is a damn good dog, stuffed with virtuous parts — the perky ears, the raffish coat. He is a solid mass of muscle, like the quadricep of an elephant."

"Maybe that's what she likes," Sally said, "but the gift of a lady's heart is beyond testosteronic comprehension."

"You know what else is beyond my testosteronic comprehension," I said, executing a deft conversational turn, "is why women had nothing to say during the *suiseki* program."

"It wasn't the *suiseki*. It was the jezebel."

"Qué?"

"The women of the village were ostracizing Sandra."

"For being a hussy?"

"She's a loose cannon."

"Or possibly a magnet for loose cannons."

"The problem with Sandra is she sexualizes every encounter with men. She's using our atom bomb when a simple *please* or *thank you* will do."

"Do you think Sandra Shore could have had something going on with Ken Tanaka?"

"Hmmm."

"Marie Bailey, Ed's wife, thinks Ken was a player."

We crossed the street for a look into the agricultural backyard of a middle school. There were gardens, goats, chickens, and rabbits. A smell of straw and dung hovered in the afternoon heat. We listened to the rustle and clucks of everyday chicken business.

"Ken didn't pounce Marianne as soon as he had the chance," Sally said. "He took her

for a walk to a place that had meaning for him, the alcove by the library. He gave her time and space to breathe. I'd say Ken was in love."

"Marie said jealousy might be the motive, if Ken's death turns out to be murder."

"Then Sandra would be the one who was jealous."

"Jealous of Marianne is what you're saying."

"Because Ken turned her down."

"Hell hath no fury..." I said, getting an eyeroll.

"We saw a prize example of a woman's vengeance in Sandra's *suiseki* presentation."

"I guess I missed that part."

"Sandra asked the audience what Ken said about rockhounds and *suiseki*."

"Yes. I thought it was a rhetorical question. I had no way of knowing what Ken might have said."

"That's right. Marianne was the only one in the room with intimate knowledge of what Ken Tanaka thought and said. Sandra knew it, and she drew Marianne out."

"It seems I underestimated Sandra."

"As soon as Marianne gave the answer, everyone in the room remembered how she knew it."

"She hung Marianne out to dry," I said, "in front of everybody."

"For one shining moment, Marianne — not Sandra Shore — was the hussy."

Chapter 19

Passion of the Gem Trees

Will Meyer's shop, The Perfect Gift, would have felt at home on Rodeo Drive but could only afford Reseda Boulevard. Every morning, Will's wife Tina swept the sidewalk in front. She ran a dustmop, held high, around the awning over the display window. She squeegeed the window. Every morning Will and Tina had a moment of prayer together, and she turned the sign on the door to Open.

The floorplan was square with a circular platform in the middle. On the platform, in a rosewood throne, sat a meter-wide glass globe that ruled the room. Continents etched the surface of the globe. A molten nickel-iron core glowed at its center. Figurines, painted plates, miniature books, scented soaps, strange coins, replicas of old-time toys, and other exquisite objects wholly lacking in utility lay around the South Pole like unwrapped Christmas presents. The aisles around the see-through globe were leisurely and wide, allowing and encouraging customers to linger over beautiful things arrayed on slender tables.

The walls were hung with eccentric paintings — not an abstract or Impressionist landscape in sight. The paintings all seemed to evoke some long-ago time or far-off place. Several depicted red-coated hunts at English country estates, or a favorite hound or horse. Several were enlargements of miniatures by the 17th century Persian master Reza Abbasi, showing winsome youths lost in study. Several celebrated the cattle-ranching days of old California, in the style of Wild West artist Frederic Remington.

Gem trees by Will Meyer were interspersed throughout the shop, reaching from

craggy bases as if to snag too-hurried customers.

"I didn't expect to see you here," said Roy Avalone. He stood with Will and Tina behind the shop counter. They had been looking at a photo album, and they all looked up at once when I walked in — Tina as if I were a customer, Will as if the FBI had just arrived with a warrant, and Roy as if he dealt with inconvenient surprises all the time.

"But I'm glad to meet Luis Regalo's nephew at last," said Roy. Turning to Will and Tina, he asked if it would be all right for me to join them. It was soon agreed Tina would mind the shop while Roy, Will, and I continued in the back room.

The back room was stark compared to the showroom. A sink, a wipe-clean table, three chairs, and not a particle of dust.

Roy opened with: "Will and I were going over some organizational basics. Bank accounts and so forth. We have an appointment at Reseda First Bank at ten-thirty, adding our new vice-president to the authorized signature cards. Is there anything we can help you with?"

I passed. "I was between errands and just dropped in."

Will had cards he wanted to lay on the table. "I did not know Ken Tanaka well. At all, really. I had nothing to do with killing him."

There was no ripple of reaction in Roy's face. Will was visibly relieved to have this declaration over and done with. His hands unclenched and color returned under his fingernails.

"I believe you," I said. "Who did kill Ken Tanaka?"

"I don't know if anyone killed him. It was an accident. By the way, I cannot take a lie detector test."

"That's okay by me," I said. "Out of curiosity, why can't you take a lie detector test?"

Will grinned unhappily. "I feel guilty of everything."

"I think I know what you mean."

"Do you really?" Will seemed hopeful.

The look on his face took me back to school days.

"In fifth grade, Mrs. Lessing used to look up from her desk suddenly and demand to know who was talking, I froze automatically. I couldn't look down, because that would seem guilty. I couldn't look at her, because I was afraid — afraid of looking guilty, which would make me look twice as guilty. Other kids used to say, 'I'm rubber, you're glue. It bounces off me and sticks to you.' For some reason I've always been superglue."

"We said that at my school," Roy said.

Roy would have been one of the kids to whom nothing stuck. His smile was open, friendly, and put on like a tie.

"Were you on the field trip when Ken fell?" I asked.

"Yes," Will said. His testimony came out like a rock slide. "There was a side road from Mule Canyon. It went up to a promontory, very steep. Our little Toyota almost didn't make it to the top. We got within ten feet, but then the car could not crawl one inch farther. I had the gas to the floor. The front of the car was tipped so far up I couldn't see the road, only sky. That was scary."

Like coming to a stop on a tightrope, I imagined.

"The car slipped backward when I switched my foot to the brake. And then there was no choice but to roll a hundred yards downhill to a level space. Slowly, with Tina's life in my hands, I kept thinking, over and over, if one of the wheels slipped to the side... In my

mind, I saw our car plunging into the crevasse. Our last moments, Tina and I, because of my mistakes, leading her to a horrible, crushing death.”

“But eventually you got up to the promontory,” I said. “Did you walk?”

Will laughed. “The Toyota made it on the second try.”

I raised an eyebrow.

“I know,” Will said. “Tina and I looked at each other. She gave me the nod. And we went for it. I don’t know how I made the turn at the top, because I sure couldn’t see the path.”

“Let’s see. You had a vision of tumbling to your death, taking the person you love most in the world with you, and you decided jointly to drive up again?”

“That was weird, wasn’t it? I guess knowing others had done it made me not want to fall short.”

“That woman has faith in you.”

“Very true, we share a faith.”

“Where was everybody when you got up top?”

“There was a flat space on top. People were scattered around. There was a slope on each side and then a sharp drop. You could see the desert floor and the Cady mountains in the distance. The ravines around us were heavily dug out, tricky footing everywhere. We were looking for epidote or any dark green material for Shane Grandville’s ‘Desert Tortoise’ mosaic.”

“Where was Ken?”

“Off to our right, more than halfway down the slope.”

“Was anyone with him?”

"People came and went. You know, they ask if you found anything and then mosey on. Del talked with Ken. No shouting, but you knew they were arguing because of who they were."

"Was anyone searching or digging near Ken?"

"Marianne and Shane were farther off to the right."

"Did you know then about Ken and Marianne?"

Will boggled, then checked across the table with Roy, who must have signaled it was okay to talk.

"Everyone knew after Quartzsite."

"On the slope, did you or Tina talk with Ken?"

"Not up there. Suzette talked with Ken, and they had words. Suzette called him a snake. She must have been the last person to talk with Ken. Ugly words to end on. Marianne screamed. Lucius scrambled down the hill. Tina and I stayed ready to help if needed. Ed Bailey went down with a medical kit. Roy was by the cars. He called 911."

"Is that the way you remember it?" I asked, turning to Roy.

Roy had a far-off look. With a shake of the head, as if waking himself, Roy said, "Will remembers vividly. For me that day is a blur. A lot happened. Most of it, I never actually saw. It was a terrible day for us."

"When you say 'us,' do you mean it was terrible for the club or terrible for you and Marianne?"

The immovable calm of Roy Avalone's face cracked open like the Red Sea. His eyes slitted. His mouth twisted for a snarl. It occurred to me he might lunge across the table to throw a punch. Will was ready to sink into the floor.

A loud rap at the door turned our heads. Tina walked in.

Tina glanced left and right, assessing the situation. Her red hair fell forward as she put her lips to Will's ear. Will got up from his chair, saying he would be right back. Their pastor had come to consult with him about church business.

Tina took Will's chair. She gave us each a lady-of-the-house smile. "Is everything quite all right?"

She spoke with an English accent. It set me wondering how Will and Tina's paths might have crossed.

"Is that a Cambridge accent?" Roy inquired.

"Magdalene College," Tina admitted, pronouncing it "maudlin."

"C. S. Lewis's college. What was your area of study, if I may ask?"

"Art history," Tina said, "with a focus on depictions of aristocratic leisure."

"How interesting," Roy said. "That explains some of the paintings in the shop. Where do you find them? Do you travel?"

"We have a stable of artists out of Cal Arts," Tina said, referring to a nearby state university. "We sell the paintings to Brits and Iranians mostly. The stagecoach California paintings are for 'old' Los Angeles families — descendants of Chandlers, Dohenys, and the like."

The Meyers might make it to Beverly Hills after all, I thought.

Tina brought me into the conversation. "How goes the investigation? Poor Will has been dreading your arrival."

"Will told me he didn't know Ken very well, and he feels guilty of everything."

"I'm afraid that's true."

"Catholic school?"

"Why yes, in Peru. But it wasn't school that traumatized him. His parents were kidnapped when he was seven. His father, then his mother a few months later. Both were killed by Shining Path terrorists. His father was an appeals court judge."

"My god," Roy gasped.

"Will doesn't talk about it. Knowing may help you understand him better."

"A child's worst nightmare," Roy said. "Did he have other family?"

"A grandmother. Will grew up in the Church."

Tina smiled, not offering further detail. Will was likely to return at any moment. Nobody wanted him walk in on a rehash of his childhood.

Drawing deeply from reservoir of social graces, I asked, "How did you meet Will, if I may ask?"

"It was five years ago. I was newly arrived in the States, traveling around, working at the Getty. For a lark, I dropped in at the rockhound show in Ventura. Will was at Demonstrations. I saw his work. I knew at once I was in the presence of a great artist."

+ + +

Three cedar trees stood like masts on a deck of petrified wood. Stout twists of oxidized wire formed the rutted trunks of the three trees. The middle trunk, being the thickest and tallest, stood as the main mast of Will Meyer's ship of trees creation. The smallest cedar made a brave foremast. Wire branches to port and starboard, and branches from these branches, and twigs from all branches, were slid up to the shoulder with drilled chips of

jade, forming boughs. Paler and darker chips gathered in such a way that great green sails seemed to billow forward in a driving wind. *The Forest Goes to Sea* was the centerpiece of Will's "Passion of the Gem Trees" display case.

A smaller composition, *The Castaway*, lay ahead of the sailing-ship forest. It was a fragment of coral reef, broken off and thrust up from fluorite ocean shallows. At the high end of the coral clung a sapling, its trunk grown westward at first but turned hard to the east. Though the trunk aimed east, its bent branches and fluttered leaves of serpentine showed prevailing winds blew west. The coral was bone white and prickly. Its spines were poisonous pink to orange at the tips. The base of the sapling had the dead color of yellow brass. The more recent growth of bark, a tarnished-copper, asserted, *Life goes on*.

The third composition, *English Oak in Autumn*, stood astern of the seagoing forest. A girdle of bleached-iron wire formed the trunk, branching left and right like welcoming arms or like the cross from which Our Savior hung. From its crown down, the English oak was draped in red and yellow beads, a mix of ruby, garnet, opal, and jasper. The roots sank thick and reassuring into a block of Midlands limestone, littered with oblong amphibolite acorns. Amid the upper leaves, hardly noticeable, a face peered out to see if the coast was clear.

What's with the guy in the tree, I asked.

"Sorry," Tina said, "bit of an inside joke. Englishmen will know it's Charles II hiding in the Royal Oak after the Battle of Worcester. Your George Washington chopped down a cherry tree. King Charles survived by the grace a leafy oak."

+ + +

It was a Puzzle Night. The New England village-scape was nearly complete, within a few brambles and unpainted rails in a ramshackle fence. Coffee had been served. Hamish was in his chair. Sally's eyes were down near the table, close enough to match puzzle pieces by their DNA.

"Is Hamish talking to you," Sally asked, "in that funny Scotland Yard voice?"

"Why do you ask?"

"You're quiet," she said. "A little too quiet."

"Just pondering. Roy surprised me today."

"How did he do that?"

"He said he loved Marianne. He was passionate."

It happened after Tina went to check on Will and the pastor, leaving Roy and me in the back room of the shop. It was like an interrogation room in its bareness. Before I could start the questioning, Roy confessed.

"I love Marianne more than my own life. Anyone who thinks I didn't care doesn't know what they're talking about. They don't know me. They don't understand Marianne."

He was leaning forward. His eyes were steady. He was sure of what he said.

I replied, "Marianne was the one who said you didn't care."

Roy pulled back, blinking, as if he'd been sprayed in the face with a garden hose.

"I assumed Luis — when I told him about the topaz earrings..."

"Marianne said her writing was never important to you. Only your work was important."

"She thought I didn't care?"

"That's what she said. Did she tell you what was going on? Did you talk with her about Ken?"

"I was in agony for those six months, every day. The make-believe errands, the meetings that ran late. Every day, I lived in the shadow of losing her. But I held on. I waited for it to be over. The topaz earrings were to show her she was free to seek her fullest self. I would love her always. It's not possible... I don't believe for a second she said I didn't care."

"I didn't make it up."

"This is getting us nowhere," Roy said.

"Then tell me. Did you push Ken Tanaka off the cliff?"

"No."

"Did you know about Ken and Marianne before Quartzsite?"

"Yes. Del came to me after Quartzsite, but I knew already. He said he wouldn't tell anyone."

"Did he suggest a way to get rid of Ken?"

"Are you demented?"

"Did he?"

"We're not gangsters."

"Is the club covering up for you, because you are one of 'us' and Ken was an intruder?"

"That's beyond ridiculous."

"Just asking."

"A conspiracy like that would require cooperation and discipline from a gaggle of eccentrics. As you may have noticed by now, rockhounds dig their own holes."

"I see your point."

"Then you admit your conspiracy theory is humbug."

"I admit that a machine with a dozen moving parts will eventually break down, especially if the moving parts are people."

"An accident is sometimes just an accident."

"Undoubtedly."

"Then why pursue this so-called investigation?"

"What investigation?"

"You just asked me if I pushed Ken down a cliff."

"You raise another very good point."

"Thank you."

"It's like the opposite of a classic 'locked room' mystery," I said, just making an observation. "We have a dozen witnesses at the scene of a spectacular death, and no one saw a thing."

"They were preoccupied, looking for green rocks."

"Every single one of them was looking at the ground at that particular moment."

"Apparently."

"How did anybody know he fell? Did he cry out?"

"I don't know," Roy said. "I can't remember."

"This is why I have to keep asking."

"By all means, keep asking. I only hope you don't ruin your uncle's confidence in the club. RGMS will shrivel without his support."

"He's aware."

Roy nodded, agreeing Uncle Luis knew everything there was to know in Reseda. He grinned suddenly at something that crossed his mind. He leaned forward confidentially.

"From time to time, I've had an inkling, the barest inkling..."

"An inkling of what?"

"Oh, here and there, I've had the impression that if I needed to have someone rubbed out, your uncle could know who to call."

"No problem," I said.

"Seriously?"

"Give me a name, the address, and a drop-dead date."

I have no idea whether Uncle Luis could order a hit. He and my father ran with a gang called the Roscoe Boulevard Boys when they were young. The club is still around. Not all of the boys went on to become successful businessmen like my uncle. They might be available for wet work. My father went on to marry a Shakespearean actress.

Hearing my story of the store, Sally said she'd like to visit The Perfect Gift.

"They do have some interesting stuff," I said.

Sally said, "I want to meet the woman who didn't ask if your name was really Romeo."

Chapter 20

Mosaic Tortoise

A mosaic is my kind of jigsaw puzzle. You put the picture together from small pieces, but they don't necessarily need to fit tightly. Assembling a mosaic, you're free to shave and reshape pieces. Don't try that with a jigsaw puzzle from a box.

Mosaics have their limitations, as Shane Grandville explained to me. A thousand-piece picture might weigh as much as a bag of cement. Which makes sense, when you consider the cement the thousand pieces are set in.

"Mosaics typically don't hang on walls," Shane said. "Usually they're installed in floors."

"Aye, the floor," averred Akira Saito. "Cannae stick yer mosaic up the ceilin'."

"Ze ceiling, nein!" Heinrich Blatt exclaimed, squinting upward. "A painting sure, but no mosaics in ze ceiling." As a budding stand-up comic, Heinrich used his German accent like charcoal starter, "my laugh-accelerant." The Jocular Geologist was getting his first gig — thirty minutes on Saturday night at Club Loco.

"Numpty business, mosaic in the ceilin'. One wee shoogle, doon it comes."

"A work of art installed in a floor," Shane continued, "comes with artistic constraints."

"You can't see the picture if you're standing on it," Mike Banks said.

"Ja, not to mention ze mopping," Heinrich chimed in, "und ze vaxxing."

"Really I'm not anti-vax," declared Shane, holding onto a pause. "But I do not do floors."

"Must write that down," Heinrich said, drawing a leather notebook from a pocket.

"What I mean is," Shane went on, "when you put a mosaic in the floor, you're stuck with the viewing distance."

Shane was thin as a rail and he dressed like Hamlet, all in black, but with a layer of rock dust. His pale hands flew around while he talked. His laugh was like startled birds escaping.

"When you look at a painting on a wall, it's at eye-level. You can back away to see the whole picture if it's really big. If it's a miniature, you can come in close to see details. But with mosaics, viewing distance is fixed. It is the distance between your face and the floor."

"At the mall," Mike said, "you can go to the second level to look down on the whole mosaic."

"There's a mosaic at the mall?" I was etching spikey leaves onto my carving class assignment. Akira Saito was outlining a burrowing owl. Shane was there to brush up on rock carving basics with Mike. Heinrich was at loose ends while Mina attended the ladies-only class on big saws.

"You can see it from the down escalator," said Mike, "like a slow zoom to a closeup."

"How have I never noticed this mosaic?"

"There's people standing on it all the time," Mike said.

"The sad, lost shoppers," Shane lamented, "wandering from store to store, searching for happiness that comes in their size. Marianne calls them mall-eyed."

"Mall-eyed," said Heinrich, taking the leather notebook out again.

"Haverin' bampots," said Akira.

"So why do you do mosaics?"

"It's the pixels," said Shane. "I'm interested in how dots and blobs turn into things that we recognize and respond to."

"Pixels are big in a mosaic," I said.

"Yes. The gaps also are big."

"The thing that's different about mosaics," I ventured, "is you're aware of the pixels, the looseness of the image. You see the gaps in the image, even while you're seeing it as a pipe or a mackerel or whatever."

"So the question is: how gappy is too gappy? Take the Big Dipper. It's a sky-mosaic with small dots and very big gaps."

"The viewer connects the dots," I said.

"Yes. Now consider that some viewers look at the dipper and see a bear instead."

"So art is in the mind of the viewer."

"As an artist, I want to say it's in the mind of the artist and interpreted by the viewer."

"Okay," I said, not seeing a practical difference.

"It's up to the artist to understand what the viewer is ready to see, and go one step farther. Impressionism, Cubism, Expressionism. An artist is someone who expands the domain of beauty, pushing at the border between beauty and chaos."

"Hmm," I said. "Is your 'Desert Tortoise' on the border between beauty and chaos?"

A pigeon-laugh flew out of Shane.

"Sorry," he said. "I was just thinking, poor Ken. It came to chaos for him. But no, my 'Tortoise' was meant to be very recognizable and safe — an education activity to support local schools. Ken asked me to come up with a paint-by-numbers design for a desert

tortoise, in shades of gray, yellow, and brown. The beauty of a tortoise, you see, is how they blend in with surrounding brush and rocks.”

“Ken commissioned the tortoise mosaic.”

“Seven hundred fifty dollars,” Shane said. “Not nearly enough, but it was three-quarters of his budget.”

“It was for a good cause.”

“Eco-awareness, sure. But Ken saw it as a team-building activity for the rock club.”

“Team building.”

“He said everyone who contributed rocks to the color buckets would feel ownership in the finished mosaic. The mosaic would travel to classrooms in local schools, and club members would feel good about that too. In Ken’s mind, the goal was to build community within RGMS, the old-timers joining in with the young. He was super-interested in groups and how they coalesce.”

“Ed Bailey told me the same thing.”

“For me, it’s pixels and gaps. For Ken, it was individuals and their sense of belonging.”

“What if Ken led a double life,” I mused, “sociology professor by day, rockhound by night?”

“Ken worked for Councilmember Perez’s office. That’s how we met. I was finishing a mosaic at the councilmember’s offices, called ‘People’s Land.’ Ken walked up and asked if I would consider a new project.”

“You were not an RGMS member before that?”

“Nope. I joined after agreeing to do ‘Desert Tortoise.’ I’m not a rockhound, but Ken

talked so knowledgeably about my work — he knew every public piece I’d done in the last five years — I was swept off my feet. Everyone will tell you how much they love this piece or that. Very few show an interest in your development as an artist.”

Where have I heard that tune before, I thought.

I said, “Ken contacted you. He said he followed your work. He persuaded you to help him with his RGMS plans.”

“Yup. Is that a Joshua tree you’re working on?”

+ + +

The “Desert Tortoise” display case by Shane Grandville was a triumph in dusty and dull. Its desert color palette ranged from buff to beige with contrasts in muddled gray, baked yellows, and boiled sage. The tawny eye of the tortoise glowed like a hot coal in comparison.

The mosaic stood almost upright in the case, propped by a rough easel of unpainted 2x4s. Three feet wide by two feet tall, the mosaic was an assembly of some 16,000 pieces and weighed ninety pounds. Most of the pieces were pebbles and strips of rock, but there was sand in some places and a few chunks of broken tarmac from US Highway 395.

The tortoise glared with one eye — from the left side of his gritty, olive-gray head — through a turtle fence. Rectangles of wire blocked his approach to a pocked-white line at the edge of a paved road. His beak hung open in disbelief. Claws at the end of his scaly forelimb hung on the wire, testing its strength.

His upper shell was Nature’s version of a geodesic dome, with hexagonal plates from

head to tail fitting into side rows of five-sided plates, which joined to rectangular plates around the hem line. Each plate was built outward in ridges like tree rings, if tree rings turned corners. The chalky to grimy ridges gave the shell a look of geologic age, like a discard from an eon when mountains were still being built, though a desert tortoise never lives longer than a hundred years or so. The tiger-colored iris of his eye was the only chromatic hint of flesh and blood.

An accompanying card noted that a hard shell defended the soft body of the tortoise from predators. Blending into the landscape helped tortoises avoid being attacked in the first place. The turtle fence, or Tortoise Exclusion Barrier, protected these creatures from dangers they were never meant to face — fast, heavy cars. The card took no notice of the glaring eye, furious about being interfered with, even if “for his own good.”

A conspicuous gap in the mosaic showed the artist had run out of pebbles in olive-gray. The outline of the tortoise’s hind limb was empty, to be filled in at a later time, when collecting at a particular site in Mule Canyon resumed.

+ + +

I was indeed carving a Joshua tree. That was a good subject, Mike said, because a Joshua tree was readily identifiable by its outline. Akira’s owl was a good subject too, instantly recognizable by its big round head on a bird body. An oak leaf, a VW beetle, a face in profile — these were all good subjects in Mike’s book. “When you know what you’re looking at,” he said, “the details are easier to see.”

“Why is everybody so in love with Joshua trees,” said Shane. “I don’t get it.”

"They point the way," I replied.

"You don't see them as ninja-like silhouettes wearing porcupine battle gloves?

Maybe that's just me."

"Marianne says Joshua trees point to LA."

"Now I'm intrigued," said Shane. "It could be a mosaic, 'Pointing to Sunset.'"

"Funded in five minutes, no doubt."

"Or 'Pointing to Sunset Boulevard' — too much?"

I made a doubtful face.

"You and Marianne were working together on the Mule Canyon field trip. Is that right?"

"More gossiping than working, but yes. We're friends."

"What was the good gossip that day?"

"That's way back. Nothing new, I think. Linda was being horrid. Roy was in mental Siberia, never talking, always working on the new book. Roz and James were hovering, hoping for hints that Marianne and Ken were about to run off."

"That sounds grueling."

"It was wearing her down, being brave all the time."

"She and Ken were still seeing each other."

"Fitfully."

"What does that mean?"

"You'll have to ask Marianne," Shane said. "I imagine they had a lot to talk about, and never a moment that felt right."

"Did you and Marianne gossip about Del?"

"I noticed Del brought his air pistol on the field trip. I was sure he brought it to annoy Ken."

"Del had an air pistol with him that day."

Akira looked up from his burrowing owl. "Aye, Del had a gun, a wee 'matic."

Shane nodded. "Completely harmless, Del liked to say. Only BBs, though it looked like a Glock."

"Do you remember where Del was when Ken fell?"

"Del was on the opposite side of the promontory, standing between cars. He might have been talking with Soapy over there."

"And where was Suzette?"

"Suzette was on the same slope as Marianne and me, on the far side of Ken from us. Will and Tina Meyer were up on the level part of the promontory. They're an interesting couple."

Shane drew a square in the air with his forefingers. "Religious, in a quiet way, very much between themselves. No paraphernalia of any denomination, so far as I can see. They might be the Church of Just Us Two."

"It's a church with some kind of a pastor. He was at their shop."

"I saw Will and Tina pray that day. Face to face, heads bowed, holding hands. This was before Ken fell. It was the two of them, taking turns saying words of devotion."

"Tina says Will is a great artist."

"He might be a great artist. It's hard to know before a hundred years have passed. Anyway, Tina is his curator."

"They have some of his gem trees at the gift shop."

"Some? It may look like a gift shop. Under the geegaws, it is the Will Meyer gallery."

"What do you think of Lucius Tiber?"

"Not my type, but a wicked sense of humor."

"Did Lucius kill Ken Tanaka?"

"No chance. Lucius is an epicure."

"Epicures don't kill?"

"The personality type of an epicure is always physical. Murderers are mental."

"What about Suzette Sanger?"

"Refugee from a screwball comedy."

"Did Suzette kill Ken Tanaka?"

"Suzette would slap a man's face if he got fresh, but murder's not in her makeup bag."

"The Saw Lady wears no makeup."

"You're right. If she had a makeup bag, murder would not be in it."

"What about Ed Bailey?"

"Boy scout. He would not kill anybody unless it was the only way to help an old lady cross the street."

"Where was Ed when Ken fell?"

"Beside his truck, keeping track of everybody, the way he always does."

"Roy Avalone."

"You got me there. He's a mental personality if there ever was one. I know his type well enough — cool, calm academic. I have no idea what story he was telling himself while Marianne was with Ken. I don't know where he was that day. I didn't see him until after

Lucius scrambled down.”

“After Ken fell, did Del still have the air pistol?”

Shane shook his head, no.

Chapter 21

Village of Spheres

Sally agreed to write up some notes about the big-saws class at the workshop. She had to ask first whether I was cleared for women-only information. Upon consideration, she decided I was okay. These are her notes:

Pre-class Milling Around

Where: Big Saws area, no chairs set up. New arrivals tentative about where to stand, who to chat with. General mood excited, self-conscious.

When: 10 a.m. No food table.

Who:

- Millie Zhang – bottled water. Work shirt, cornflower blue, tails out. She walks up and intro's herself. What do I think of Uncle Luis? She "loves" him. She might really.
- Roz McCleggy – diet soda in can. Work shoes from Warthoggs catalog. Actively circulating.
- Mina Blatt – fruit juice via twirly straw from an army canteen on a shoulder strap. Saddle shoes and black tights. Greets everyone, but uses no words. She's in character.
- Linda Pradera – bottled water. Straight-waisted brown smock, loose jeans. Not partnering with anyone, stiff.

- Sandra Shore – bottled water. Tube top and tight jeans. She and Linda end up together, the singletons.
- Margot Arrete – latté in half-liter cup from drive-thru. Rings on thumbs and most fingers. Introducing her student Vera to everyone.
- Vera Vasquez – latté in half-liter cup from drive-thru. “Revolt of the Cockroach People” t-shirt. Listening but skeptical of all grownups.
- Melissa “Missy” Banks – no beverage. Gym uniform (St. Mel’s High School). Came for Self-Directed Learning credits. [Mike Banks’ niece]
- Carmela Sweet – unknown soda (clear, bubbly) in convenience store cup w/ plastic snap-on lid (landfill filler). Green plastic slip-on shoes, also landfill filler and borderline violation workshop rules. “Let’s get this party started.”
- Sally Heimkrantz – bottled water. Amazing new open-shoulder blouse with rolled-fabric strings (had to wear it; brought an apron to protect against oil splashes; will hate myself if blouse is ruined). Smiling/nodding/making mental notes for boyfriend. Things we do for love.
- Not attending: Marianne Avalone, Coral Finchum, Doris Drusenberg.

Meet the Teacher

Suzette arrives, starts right in, no niceties. She grew up using tools — carpentry, plumbing, electrical — helping father w/ upkeep of family-owned motel on Rte 66. “Most women never get that experience handling men’s tools.” She looks around, thinking someone will make a sexual joke of what she said. Where’s the teenage boy when you need

one?

Today's class a first step, helping a few overcome fears. Maybe. No guarantees.

Anyone bring a rock?

Cantaloupe-size, Vera.

Gather round, see rock sitting in rock holder (vise).

Upper half of blade must be taller than clamped rock. Rule of thumb: 24 inch saw will cut 8 inch rock max (in general, 1/4 to 1/3 of blade diameter).

Use crank on vise to tighten grip on rock.

IMPORTANT: irregular rock shapes may slip in vise, ruin costly blade. Insert shims to ensure vise has three strong pressure points.

Squeeze lever to slide carriage to blade.

Carriage crank adjusts left/right for thick/thin cut.

Shut lid before motor start. Spinning blade throws oil.

Red switch starts saw blade. White advances carriage to blade.

Suzette: Any questions?

There are no questions.

Suzette: Well then, I've got a question. What's this about cockroaches on your t-shirt? Is that a horror movie?

Vera (*tilting her head*): It's me affirming the struggle of brown people against the white Wall St. patriarchy.

Suzette (*staggering comically*): What? Have I died and gone to Berkeley?

Vera: I stand with the people against all oppressors.

Suzette: You don't know anything about "patriarchy." You don't know about women who stand up for themselves.

Vera: I know my rights.

Suzette: Women were astronauts before you were born. There's always been women who made their own way.

Margot: You asked her a question, Suzette. She gave you her answer.

Suzette presses the red button, ending debate. Whine of the saw motor, scream of the blade biting rock.

Suzette points to next saw. Two volunteers will do setup. Margot lays hands on Vera's shoulders, stay back. Mina comes forward. "Not you!" cries Suzette, "no clowning" (not sure of wording, saw too loud).

Linda steps up. Suzette points at Missy to join Linda. After a moment of fumbling and looking around, Linda and Missy work marvelously together, gesturing to explain each step. Linda places a half-loaf of travertine in the vise. She raises and lowers her level hand, showing the saw blade is taller than the rock. Missy holds up a circle of finger and thumb, *A-OK!* Linda points to the vise crank and tips her head, *Would you do the honors?* Missy tightens the vise. In turn, she suggests with a push-gesture that they slide the rock toward the blade. Suzette leans in now and then, nodding approval. Missy presses red button, white button. Class applauds. At the back, standing high on a pallet, Mina applauds with fingers spreading like fireworks.

Linda and Missy take a bow. Linda takes a long look at the girl in her school uniform. She is about Hector's age.

Afterthought. It was a little surprising that single-mom Linda went spontaneously to pantomime, and Missy followed so aptly. Was Mina stage-directing from the back of the crowd? [Yes, Mike Banks confirms.]

+ + +

Mina Blatt's display case presented a few favorites from a collection of spheres that she bought at an estate sale. Not many rockhounds make spheres anymore, now that the days of plentiful collecting are gone. A block of rock big enough to make a decent sphere holds dozens of potential cabochons — wasted in solid, stolid stone. After all, a sphere is just a ball, pleasing for a moment in its fullness of stripes or swirls, like a lava lamp in freeze-frame, but not good for much of anything other than sitting on a mantel (collecting dust and so aggregating very slowly into a larger sphere, according to Heinrich).

Stick figures made of pipe cleaners were the people in Mina's village of spheres. One of her pipe cleaner people wore a black beret, borrowed from doll clothes, with a black-white horizontal-stripe t-shirt and black A-line skirt. This mini-Mina stood halfway up a ramp, holding back a colossal banded-agate sphere with just one fuzzy-wire hand. Her free hand gestured merrily down Main Street.

Main Street led to a charcoal sketch on the back wall: it was Charlie Chaplin's bowler hat, worried eyebrows, and Scottish Terrier mustache. Two spheres of white/black onyx, like reverse 8-balls, stared from under Charlie's eyebrows, focusing on the village square.

In the village square, pipe-cleaner people stood in a wedge formation. They were like milk bottles in bright red bowties. An Ocean Jasper sphere — a swirling mass of orbs

and golden tentacles — seemed about to knock them all down. One of the milk bottles was bent to a diving posture, ready to make like a flying ten-pin.

The flying ten-pin's trajectory pointed to the outdoor tables of a café, where a pipe-cleaner waiter with a dish towel over his forearm carried a tray holding an enormous chocolate dessert — a sphere of moss agate with spatters of dark chocolate and a layer of chocolate crème, served in a chilled snifter. One wondered how the skinny-wristed waiter could hold so great a weight of lusciousness.

Far above the speeding waiter, a mottled marble Moon presided in the black velvet of approaching night. Soon the waiter and all the busy town — their waking hours a madcap commotion of wonders and pratfalls — would lie in their beds, their little lives rounded with a sleep.

Missy Banks visited the RGMS show with a friend, who happened to be a boy, Marcus. At Mina's display case, Marcus tried but could not see how the Moon hovered in the sky without support. Missy knew the designer of the display case. Off they went in search of Mina.

Mina was not at the show that day, but Heinrich was at the Information table.

Heinrich said. "You're Mike Banks' niece, right?"

Missy said yes she was.

"Well then," said Heinrich, in a confidential voice. "You know how a chameleon colors himself like the scenery around him."

Missy and Marcus said they knew.

"Go back to the display case. Shine your phone light at a floating sphere — over,

under, left, right, they vary. You'll see shadows of wires in the light. And one more thing..."

Missy and Marcus waited, falcons straining to fly.

"The secret is now yours. Reveal it to no one."

+ + +

Will Meyer sat at the entrance to the workshop, handing out badges and checking membership status (dues paid). Coral Finchum sat beside him, briefing the new vice-president on responsibilities of the Membership chair and her way of updating the RGMS membership list, which had worked fine for the past seven years without fancy software.

Will's eyes were friendly and unworried, now that he knew I knew he could not take a lie detector test.

"Romeo," said Coral, "just the man I wanted to see."

"How may I be of service?"

"Roy wants us to update the membership brochure. Would you read this over, please, and suggest any changes you think would make it better?"

She pushed a tri-fold flyer across the table.

"We'd like your thoughts as a new member."

"Sure thing."

"And do you think Sally could look at it too? She's in marketing and graphic design."

"I'll ask if she has time. This is the busy season in health insurance."

"Of course," Coral said. "We can only ask. But there's one more thing, if it's all right."

"Shoot."

"Romeo, what have you done in the last twenty-four hours to make Sally say no to the moon and stars?"

"That's something I usually don't talk about," I said. "In your case, this one time..."

"Yes?"

"I scrubbed her back," I said, "in the bath."

"Ah, thank you," Coral said. "It's what I hoped."

"You caught me on a good day. It's not always that romantic."

"Never mind, The principle is inspiring."

"I love bath time," Will said.

A moment of quiet followed, in which our several ideas of bath time swirled.

"How is the new vice-president doing so far," I asked.

"If I may say, with no reference good or bad to others, having Will Meyer among us is a blessing."

Turning to Will, I said, ""One more question about the field trip, the day Ken died."

Will's expression rippled from "modesty" to "bracing for a train wreck."

"Nothing to worry about, Will," I said. "I know you're truthful."

"Please don't ask me to harm anyone with the truth," Will said. "Unless it is absolutely necessary."

I heard Coral take a breath.

"When Del was standing between the cars, just before Ken fell, did he have the air pistol?"

Not looking away, Will took a moment to think. "I didn't see it."

"Did you see the pistol at any time on that field trip?"

"No. There was no target shooting that day."

"There was target shooting on other field trips."

"At Baxter Wash. Del and Soapy took turns shooting at bottles and cans. Away from the others. They were careful."

"When Ken fell from the cliff. Del and Soapy were talking between the cars. Did Soapy have the pistol?"

"His back was turned to me. I couldn't see."

"Coral," I said, "did Soapy shoot Ken with the pistol?"

Frozen, eyes wide, Coral made no reply.

I said, "If Ken got plinked with a BB, it's easy to imagine how he would turn suddenly, lose his balance. Is that the way it happened?"

"I wasn't there," Coral said.

"Soapy would tell you if something like that happened, wouldn't he?"

"I don't know. It's horrible you're saying this."

"Did Soapy put a BB in Ken's ear to please you?"

"Of course not. What happened to Ken was God's will, That's all the explanation anyone should need."

Coral was pale and short of breath, then astonished, as Soapy dragged up a folding chair and sat in it backwards, a playful grin in his salt-and-pepper whiskers.

"Did I hear someone taking my name in vain?"

The square of sunlight from the workshop's double doorway went into eclipse as new arrivals walked up for badges. Will and Coral leapt to the checking of names and riffling for badges in the alphabetically organized shoebox. The new arrivals noticed the

women's class by the big saws, and they whew'd their relief that a few grinding/polishing machines were still open. They had brought slugs of Montana agate for polishing into cabochons.

I said to Soapy as the newly badged members hurried to the open machines, "We were just talking about Del's air pistol, and where it was on the day Ken died."

"I don't know nothin' about no air pistol," Soapy said.

"Sure you do. Shoots BBs. Plinking bottles and cans."

"No, sir," Soapy insisted, "I ain't heard of no BB guns on field trips. Ed Bailey wouldn't allow —."

Soapy reverberated from a hard slap of his wrist. Coral's open hand came to rest on the table. Her lips barely moving, she said: "Never bear false witness in my presence. I won't stand for it."

With a quick shake of his head, Soapy slipped from surprise into remorse. "I'm sorry, darlin', I thought..."

"Just tell the truth," Coral said, as if to a child in Sunday school. "Tell the truth without any dodging or fudging. Let the Lord see to the consequences."

"I didn't have the BB gun. It was in a tackle box in the back of Del's truck."

"All right," I said. "Did Del have the pistol out at any time during the field trip?"

"We were a hundred feet off. You couldn't be sure of hitting a target at that distance, not a moving target."

"You could have shot ten BBs. One might have hit the target. Nobody would have noticed the one tiny wound with all of Ken's other injuries."

Soapy wailed, "I just told you I didn't shoot him. The pistol was in a box in the back

of the truck.”

“Was the box locked?”

“How would I know?” Soapy said. “No, it wasn’t locked.”

Chapter 22

Spiral Snailcase

James McCleggy appeared like a genie from a bottle. He loomed in front of the badge table, being patient while we cringing mortals — Soapy, Coral, Will, and I — figured out what we should wish for. Whatever we said to him would ripple through the world, with consequences we could not foresee but would have to live with. He prompted us with a question.

“You say the air pistol was in an unlocked box in the back of Del’s truck. Anyone could have opened that box. Anyone could have taken the gun. Who had the gun at the moment Ken fell from the promontory, sixty-five feet to his death?”

“It’s possible the gun stayed in the box,” I pointed out.

“Theoretically possible, but come on,” said James.

That’s how it started, the notorious Who Had the Gun list.

I said, “Del didn’t have it, as far as Will remembers. Soapy didn’t have it, according to Soapy. The nearest to Ken on the slope were Marianne and Shane. Suzette Sanger was there. Lucius Tiber was twenty feet farther to the side,. Presumably, all these people were so close that none of them could have aimed and fired a pistol without being seen by at least one of the others.”

“Not so fast,” said James. “What do we really know about this Shane Grandville? “

“The artist!” exclaimed Soapy, as if it were a synonym for dope fiend. “The artist done it.”

“Marianne was right next to Shane,” James countered. “She certainly would have

noticed if he pulled a gun.”

Soapy was undaunted. “Suppose Shane was in love with Marianne. Suppose Marianne was fed up with Ken. She wanted Shane instead. She mighta turned a blind eye.”

Coral intervened. “Shane might have been in love with Ken. He was not in love with Marianne, and never will be.”

“All right, let’s say Ken rejected Shane’s advances,” Soapy offered. “Shane shot Ken for revenge.”

“Why did Marianne keep quiet?” Coral demanded.

“She was ashamed and afraid,” Soapy said. Then he added, “Shane was blackmailing her.”

Soapy sat back, with a nod. Case closed.

Thus, Shane became Suspect #1 on the list, which James wrote down, “for the record.” Marianne became Suspect #2 because the killer-blackmailer role was easily switched around — Marianne’s love for Ken turned to hate. She shot him, and Shane said nothing because Marianne threatened to out him.

“What about Suzette. And Lucius,” James inquired.

“If anyone on the slope had the air pistol,” I said, “it means they took the weapon from Del’s truck and kept it concealed. It means premeditation.”

“That’s true,” said James. “Murder in the first degree.”

“Premeditation means there had to be a strong, clear motive. You don’t commit murder on account of being miffed,” I said. “As to Lucius, I don’t see how killing Ken would bring any reward or solve any problem for him. No motive.”

Thus was Lucius bumped down to Suspect #4. Suzette took the #3 spot on James’s

list when Will said, reluctantly, “Suzette called Ken a snake. She was extremely angry.”

“Let’s say for the moment Suzette shot Ken,” I opined. “Ken was in the process of standing up. He felt the sting of a BB. He turned to see what was happening, and lost his balance. Where did Suzette hide the weapon?”

“Everyone on a field trip has a collecting bag,” Coral said. She was beaming, enjoying a Marple moment.

“Suzette hustled down after Ken like a bobcat,” said Soapy, possibly competing with Coral, taking his turn as a sourdough Poirot. “Getting down there, she’d a known right away if Ken was dead or if he tried to leave a dying clue.”

“This is very good,” James said, lotioning his hands without the benefit of lotion. “We’re getting somewhere. What about someone shooting from a distance, possibly under cover. Who else was on the field trip?”

Soon James had a complete list. It noted locations (as recalled by Will or Soapy), motives, and additional considerations. Copies circulated among a select few. New copies sprouted somehow like dandelions, with corrections and various enhancements to the additional considerations. RGMS Librarian Roz McCleggy collected and preserved the several editions, with her own further annotations.

On the list, locations were noted as East, North, or West, referring to sides of the promontory, or as Cars, referring to the parking in the middle. The North and Cars areas were adjacent to the East, where Ken was. The West area had no direct line of sight or line of fire on the East.

Shane Grandville East Sexual rivalry

Ally of Ken, friendly with Marianne, triangle?

Marianne Avalone East Revenge

Did she feel used by Ken?

Lucius Tiber East Resentment

All food, no sex. Voted with Del while agreeing with Ken.

Suzette Sanger East Control of workshop

Hated Ken. BB gun plan very iffy, high risk.

Soapy Stovall Cars Impress Coral

High-risk plan, unreliable outcome, not a barrier for Soapy.

Del Musselman Cars Cussedness

Despised Ken. Witness saw Del with no gun. Witness reliable?

Roy Avalone Cars Alienation of affection

Calm on the outside, passions bottled-up. Near the truck.

Ed Bailey Cars Felt betrayed by Ken

Ally and friend to Ken. Display case memorial.

Will Meyer Cars Became VP

Milquetoast, deep-seated aversion to terrorism.

Sandra Shore North Jealousy

Rejected by Ken? Mere supposition! While you're at it, go ahead and accuse her of being a witch.

Linda Pradera North Hatred of adultery

Adultery a trigger. Protecting her son top priority.

Hector Pradera North Sexual dysphoria

Adored Marianne. Resorted to deception at times.

Mike Banks North Unknown

Not a friend or foe of Ken. Minds own business. Firearms expert.

Margot Arrete North Unknown

Del's ex. Ally of Ken. Opinionated, aggressive. Expert with knives, torches, and probably firearms.

Mina Blatt West Unknown

The girl is weird, but not that kind of weird.

Heinrich Blatt West Unknown

Comedy kills, not The Jocular Geologist.

Akira Saito West Unknown

Rock carver. Talks funny. Mostly solitary. Acquaintance of Ken.

Millie Zhang West Unknown

Numbers type. Murder not her style.

A note at the end of the list read: “Or nobody shot Ken with a BB gun, and the pistol stayed in the tackle box the whole time, the way it always has in the past — DM.”

+ + +

As an engineer, Akira Saito took an interest in construction. His “Spiral Snailcase” display case highlighted architectural details of a large (50 cm, 20 inch) fossil shell. The original owner was a *Pachydiscus catarina*, a saltwater species that went extinct with the dinosaurs. The “shell” was a plaster copy Akira made at a paleontology site in Baja California. Akira’s favorite nephew was on the faculty at the University of California, San Diego.

The shell lay on the floor of the case, propped up a little for ease of viewing. The plaster was tea-stained to show seams and folds. Gumdrops were stuck on to call attention to areas of interest. Lengths of blue yarn led to explanatory cards on the back wall. The top-left card read:

A spiral shell is a tube wrapped around itself.

This particular shell wrapped around itself 3.5 times, ending at a tall oval like the mouth of a cave. The next card read:

Tube diameter increases with each wrap.

So the shell, though rounded, was not circular. It was profoundly asymmetrical.

Distance from center to outer wall jumps on each wrap.

The next card addressed the ribbed intervals in the spiral.

Creature inside gets bigger. Shell gets bigger.

Too-small spaces are sealed off behind.

There were important implications for the lifestyle of the creature inside:

Creature inside lives in the front room,

drags 20 closets of the past.

Pachydiscus fossils are found throughout the world:

Antarctica, Chile, Brazil, western Africa, Europe, Turkey, the Persian Gulf, Russia, Japan, Australia, and North America — from Alaska to New Jersey.

Eight tea-stained circles in the mouth of the cave prompted questions from many visitors. Volunteers at the Information table had to update their quick-reference cards. The circles in the shell opening were the eight fossilized limbs of the creature inside, cut off abruptly like the whole *Pachydiscus* clan in the Chicxulub Crater extinction.

Akira's display case concluded with a poetic perspective:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre...

the centre cannot hold. — W.B. Yeats

+ + +

Hamish barked furiously at the door, as if a howling pack of Socialist wolves from Jack London's Yukon had come to bite our throats and tear us to meaty shreds. And take away our guns. I opened the door without checking the peephole. It was Marianne, invited guest.

Her smile was bright. Rays of "happy to see you" lit the corners of her eyes. Ken had given crow's feet to Pinkie, the rhodonite queen of his display case — lovingly, as Sally had

said.

“Bring on the hors d’oeuvres,” said Marianne.

I had baked a pair of semolina baguettes, now sliced as rounds and toasted to crunchy perfection. There was cream cheese with pimento for a spread. Sally brought out her favorite deli’s Marinated Fish Horror Show and a cold pitcher of mimosas. We gathered under the patio umbrella.

Hamish lay at Marianne’s feet, his chin resting on the warm concrete, marinated fish on his breath.

“So how’s it going, the investigation,” Marianne said.

“A picture is coming together,” I said. “The BB gun theory got people talking.”

“Could that be true, do you think — someone shot Ken?”

“It has flushed a lot of detail out of the bushes.”

Marianne leaned forward, confiding. Her voice was thinner, throat tightened.

“It hasn’t been easy — hearing about the gun, what people think.”

“Who are you hearing from?”

“Roz,” Marianne said. “I called her. After Roy told me, about the list.”

“Roz. I hope she wasn’t too much.”

“That horrible list.”

“What was Roy like? Did he know how it would make you feel? Or was he blaming you?”

“He informed me. It was like a weather advisory.”

“Something else I wanted to ask about Roy. When did he know for sure about you and Ken.”

"You can't possibly think Roy killed Ken."

"I met the Mr. Hyde side of Roy the other day. At Will and Tina Meyer's shop. You can take it from me, there was fury in him. He also said he was in agony every day for months."

Marianne straightened. Her mouth opened, but the words took time finding their way out. When they did, she said, "I need a refill."

Sally went to the fridge for the pitcher. She sat beside Marianne, laying a comforting arm around her shoulder.

"Could he be violent?" Marianne asked.

"The outburst was real," I said. "He wanted to hit me, or strike back at anything, I guess. I didn't see a grim intent to do harm."

"We've been married six years," Marianne said. "You know more about him than I do."

"You've stayed married. That means something. Did Ken ask you to leave Roy?"

"We talked about it. At times. After Quartzsite, things got really difficult. It was harder to meet. Too little time when we did, for talking about more than the next few days. Half the time it was like I was sleepwalking, where the walls were real and the cold floor on my feet, but people talking and wanting things drifted near and then drifted away. There were moments of clarity, me telling myself to be strong, conserve the real me. For Ken. What I remember vividly is lying on the couch with my head in Ken's lap. He fluffed my hair. He traced my eyes, my mouth, with his fingertip — pretending he was Renoir, painting my portrait. Renoir with a Clouseau accent."

"Did he talk about your leaving Roy?"

"We talked about it. Ken said we could move to Modesto or New York."

Sally sprayed champagne, couldn't help it, "Modesto, somewhere south of Sacramento. Or New York City, world capital?"

"Ken said he could get another job immediately in Modesto. He knew the city manager from school. New York was for me. New York was the place to be for a writer to grow and publish."

"Did you make specific plans, imagine a date when you would go one place or the other?" I asked. "I'm asking if Roy could have sensed something was about to happen."

"Running off together was only one possibility. Ken offered to quit the club and disappear, never see me again, let everyone get on with their lives, putting things back together as best they could. Or he could stay, and he and I would have to be together — Roy or no Roy. If he stayed, Ken said he would run for president of the club."

"You've got to be kidding," Sally said.

"Ken was serious, at that moment. He said if he stayed, the club needed to change."

"In what universe could you and Ken stay together as if no one were watching? After Quartzsite, everyone was watching."

"I know. At the time, I don't know..."

"If Ken ran for president, he'd be asking people in the club to vote for your lover to replace your husband."

"It sounds pretty out there."

"Who else knew Ken was thinking of running for president?" I said. "Did Shane know?"

"I'm sure he did."

"How close are you with Shane?"

"I like him, but he was Ken's friend. Shane and I have never talked at any deep level. Nowhere near the way I have talked with Sally and you."

"Forgive my asking," I said, "but did you ever get the feeling there was anything romantic between Shane and Ken?"

Marianne turned to Sally. "Is he for real?"

"Let me put it another way," I said. "Did Ken ever say anything that made you think he was using Shane to get his way about other things, in the club?"

"Obviously, yes." Marianne made a face, a bad taste in her mouth. She saw what the next question would be and who it would point to. She said, "Ken asked Shane to create the 'Desert Tortoise' mosaic for the purpose of building a sense of community among diverse members of the club. He paid Shane for that work."

"You probably know," I said, "that Ken recruited Shane into the club. He got Shane's attention and won him over ... by showing that he knew Shane's work. He showed interest in Shane's development as an artist."

"People have layers," Marianne said. "Sometimes the layers are lined up and make sense together, sometimes the layers are ... catawampus. There is doubleness. I loved Ken. I wanted him to be happy with me. I also thought his ideas for the club were good ideas. He wanted my help, and it made me happy to help him. There's no way to prove it, even if we could ask him right now, but I believe Ken loved me. He was aware of my work before we met. We met by chance. He could not have known I had any connection to a rock club. When we met in person, Ken knew me already as the person he saw in my writing. I believe he loved me at first sight. That's how I think of Ken and how I want to remember him. So

thank you very much for spitting in my drink.”

Hamish was sitting up now. Was that a questioning look in his cocked ears and obsidian eyes? You know you’re on shaky ground when your dog wonders if you are still worthy.

“I’m with you,” Sally said. “This guy Romeo can be such an embarrassment — like a ten-year-old in line at the supermarket asking if the person in front of you is a man or a woman.”

A stillness hung in the air.

“Sometimes,” Sally added, “I have to give the man credit. My Romeo has insight.”

Marianne said, “He’s making everyone uncomfortable, and most will be the better for it.”

Chapter 23

Bat Cave Jasper

Ed Bailey drove. Del Musselman rode shotgun. In back, Mike Banks and I watched the suburbs go by. In the car behind us, Roz McCleggy drove. Her passengers were Suzette Sanger, Roy Avalone, and Doris Drusenberg. We were heading to Mule Canyon for a walk-through.

This expedition started with my asking Ed if I could tag along next time he scouted Mule Canyon for a field trip. Ed said now was as good a time as any to break the spell. He mentioned the plan at a Board meeting, and the next day Del asked to come. Then he asked if Doris could come too. She didn't get out much and the desert air would do her good. Soon after, Roz and James volunteered to drive if anyone else wanted to go. The day before we went, James McCleggy dropped out because he had a better offer. A bush plane flying to Searles Lake had an open seat.

Mike Banks cocked his eye when I asked him to join the trip to Mule Canyon. "What for? There's no carving material up there."

"I won't know what I'm looking at," I said. "I need you to help me see."

Mike said all right.

It's 150 miles from Reseda to the Calico Mountains. During a long drive, rockhounds talk first about the weather and the likelihood of high winds. They have surprisingly little to say about sports, unless a son or daughter has a game that weekend. They talk about good sites for rocks, about places they have been or haven't been, and about rockhounds who have won glory or infamy. ("Pirates!" Ed exclaimed about the Bourzain brothers of the

Irwindale Gem and Mineral Society.) On the road, rockhounds revisit old times, knitting up the raveled edges of experience.

With his window open two inches, Ed had to talk loud to make himself heard. He said to Del:

"The Board meetings are a lot different now."

"A lot happier, I guess," Del replied.

"There's less cherry pie flying around."

Del laughed. "It's a shame to waste cherry pie."

Ed had nothing to say to that. A big pause touched down like a blimp. Del said:

"How's the new vice-president doing?"

"He'll be all right," Ed said. "He's getting plenty of help."

"Good to hear. I know he'll get loads of guidance from the new Show chair."

"Margot will be Margot," Ed said. "Are you going to help with the show if she asks?"

"Sure. I'm standing back for now, so Margot has a free hand. I'll volunteer to help with cables and tools. That would be a good time to train somebody new — on how we do setup and organize the packing for storage."

"Are you hoping for a comeback?"

"I'm really not. What happens to the club — it's not up to me anymore," Del said.

"Thanks to you."

"I did what I thought was right."

"I know you did. And I sincerely mean thank you. I'm out of all that now. It has been a great relief."

"You'll stay with the club?"

"As a general member."

"A vacuum at the top draws new leaders up," Ed said.

"That sounds more like Buddha than Ed Bailey," Del mused. "Let me guess..."

"Ken Tanaka," Ed said.

Del sighed. "I can just hear him saying those words. That Ken. That meddling, wheedling, unstoppable bastard."

We swung north on I-15 toward Cajon Pass. The notch between the San Gabriel Mountains and the San Bernardino Mountains was where the Santa Fe Railroad slipped through in 1885. The railbed ran beside Cajon Creek, which had cut deep into layers of crumbly rock along the San Andreas fault. The fault line was where popular imagination foresaw California snapping off one day in a great earthquake. That day never came. Traffic skimmed across the deeply drawn geologic border. The long chassis of Ed's extended cab truck surfed onto the basement-rock beach of the North American plate. Victorville lay ahead, gateway to the Mojave.

"There's marble exposed up there," Mike said. He pointed to hills stepping down from the peaks of the San Gabriels. "Farther on, at Stoddard Wells Road, there's the Verde Antique quarry, pale green marble. The green is serpentine. I don't mess with it."

"You don't like green?"

"Don't like asbestos."

Serpentine is the California state rock. It became the state rock, and gold became the state mineral, as proposed by the California Federation of Mineralogical Societies (CFMS), in 1965 — in the glory days of rockhounding. We know now serpentine commonly contains chrysotile, one of the fibrous silicates classified as asbestos. Serpentine is not good for

carving, cutting, grinding, or sanding.

"I don't go looking for trouble," Mike said. "Seen plenty already."

In Barstow, we stopped for bladder relief and more coffee.

Ten miles on, at Yermo, we took Calico Road toward a flock of stunted mountains, like flannel-gray sheep in the klieg light of morning. We turned onto a dirt road that ran straight for half a mile and then into a labyrinth.

Mule Canyon meandered between cliffs that were too high to see the top of from inside the truck. We turned left into a side canyon where the streambed whispered of flash floods. The gutted road ribboned over a saddle, and we came to the base of a steep climb, which I knew at once was the slope where Will Meyer believed he and Tina might die young, strapped inside a car, tumbling onto pitiless rocks.

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Bat Cave Jasper, also known as Rim Jasper, comes from a cliff in eastern Oregon, near Ochoco Lake. Or it used to. The cave was a lava tube, 15 feet up from the base of the cliff. Old-timers told of climbing ladders to reach the opening. On flimsy footing, they hammered, chiseled, and pried chunks of the creamy, layered color — almond to caramel to chocolate.

A hardy few shimmied in. The cave was barely wide enough to allow moving their arms. They heard squawks and squeaks in the darkness. The most determined miners knocked a few chunks loose and wriggled out again.

By the end of the 1960s, the cave had been stripped clean. Only the dark matrix was left. And the bats. Stray pieces of Bat Cave Jasper turned up for a few more years in the

rubble below the cave, but the pieces grew smaller and ever more rare.

Mike Banks had a dozen pieces of Bat Cave Jasper, including three hand-sized slabs. The rest were odd shapes and sizes, a little larger or smaller than a silver dollar. Mike received this collection as a graduation gift from his carving teacher, the legendary Parker Ehrenberg. She was one of the determined rockhounds who brought cores out from deep inside the bat cave.

“Make something beautiful, Mike,” she said.

Mike promised that he would. It was an honor to be entrusted with some of the last few pieces of a great carving material. The world had no more to give.

Mike’s “Bat Cave Jasper” display case presented nine pieces as scattered shards on a bed of river rocks — as if a Wedgwood urn in cream and brown had been thrown from the cliff above Ochoco Lake. It was the custom in certain cultures to destroy decorated pots after the artist died. Surviving works detained the artist’s spirit in this world.

The carved images on the shards — cream on caramel and chocolate — took inspiration from Greek mythology, a topic Mike rediscovered on a field trip with Missy’s Classical Civilizations class to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. The figures he saw on ancient ceramics were sharp outlines against a contrasting background. Details rendered in a few fine lines were easy to see.

On his medallion-size pieces, Mike outlined a ship with a square sail, an urn wrapped in grapevines, a chariot carrying the Sun, a labyrinth with a lurking Minotaur, a forlorn woman looking out to sea, a man holding a sextant. Details scored in the cream shapes revealed oarsmen straining in the ship, a god with curly hair amid the grapes, a daring boy at the reins of the chariot, a timid girl at the mouth of the labyrinth, a mother’s

tears in the eyes looking out to sea, and a father's ambitious eye sighting through the sextant.

Three large slabs lay at the center of the display. One showed Icarus in ragged wings, plunging to his doom. To the left of Icarus, the Minotaur roared in his empty labyrinth. His head was dark brown — the slab being flipped and carved from the reverse side to show the dark rock uppermost. To the right of de-feathered Icarus, the dark sails and dark hull of Theseus' ship plowed a caramel sea under a pale sky.

Mike had three pieces of Bat Cave Jasper remaining, still blank, safe at home.

Missy's teacher in Classical Civilizations, upon seeing Mike's display case, commented that "Bat Cave Jasper" could have been called "My Three Sons." Icarus, he said, was the son of inventor-magician Daedalus. Icarus died of not heeding his father's instructions. The Minotaur, a monster born to Queen Pasiphae, was doomed by DNA to live in savagery and die by violence. The hero Theseus "forgot" to switch his funereal dark sails to white, causing his father King Aegeus to step down prematurely, committing suicide in grief because he thought his son had died.

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Ed Bailey took a moment to survey the steep incline ahead. He gunned the accelerator and steered the fishtailing truck to the top as though he had done it countless times before. With the nose of the truck pointing skyward, he made the turn onto the flat top of the promontory. He parked gingerly, as though pulling into a painted slot in a crowded ten-story deck. Roz skidded up alongside.

Suzette was the first out and walking around. She did a slow three-sixty. The wide desert plain lay behind us and below, bracketed by the walls of Mule Canyon. In the folds between ridges to our right was the stretch of diggings known as Tin Can Alley. The ravines ahead and to the left bore the scraped-white marks of borate mining. Suzette ran a skinny-legged lap around the top, flapping her arms in slow-motion like a sea bird with long rubber wings.

"Wheee-youuu," she sang out, "it's good to get out of the car."

"I'll help Doris," Del said, shouldering his door open.

Mike and I got out, and a group of three coalesced as Roy Avalone ambled over. Roz joined us, and then Ed, tucking his driving sunglasses into a shirt pocket and putting his field sunglasses on. Our group drifted toward Del and Doris. Her walker was balking at every stone. At her side, Del took slow, heavy steps. He kept one hand hovering near her back.

"What's the plan?" Suzette said, coming in for a landing.

I said, "My plan is to look around and see for myself where everybody was."

"Do you want to ask questions?" Roy asked. "Re-enact what happened?"

"The most helpful thing for me," I said, "would be to see where Ken was standing."

"I know where," Suzette declared. She sailed with arms spread and lighted on the sloping eastward edge of the promontory. She spoke up like a schoolgirl who knew the right answer. "Right here!"

I turned to Mike.

"Maybe a few steps farther out," he said. "But let's not mess around. It's more dangerous than it looks."

"Agreed," said Roy. "No parlor games."

"Thank you, Suzette," I called. "Where were Marianne and Shane at that time?"

Suzette cantered up the slope and over to the right.

"Thank you," I said. "And where were you standing?"

Wings swept back, Suzette jetted to the left and took up her station.

"When Ken was arguing with you," I said, "did you move toward Ken, or did you stay right there?"

"I stayed right here," she said, "by my trusty pile of rocks. I had a couple of good ones."

"Thank you, Suzette," Roy called. "You can come back now."

As Suzette galloped toward us, Roz McCleggy pulled her safari hat back. "What have we learned so far, Romeo, anything new?"

"What we have learned so far," I said, "is that I would be scared to stand where Ken was standing."

"Now what?" Suzette wanted to know, ready to swoop somewhere new.

"Where were you standing, Del?" I asked.

Del gave me a tired look and pointed as if for the hundred and first time. He pointed toward the parked car and truck. He said, "About a hundred feet away."

"Del, would you mind showing exactly where, so far as you remember?"

"I'm helping Doris," Del said.

"Ed might help Doris for a minute," I suggested.

Suzette took off. She planted herself straight as a stake by Ed's truck. Del waved left. Suzette scrambled left. Del motioned to go backward. Suzette beeped backward until Del

signaled okay.

"Mike," I said, "from where Suzette is right now, to where Ken was standing — could you hit a target at that distance with an air pistol?"

"Air pistol," Mike said, as if counting up the many meanings of those two words.

"What kind of target?"

"Say a basketball, about six feet off the ground."

Mike swept his outstretched hand from Suzette to the eastward slope.

"Yes, I could hit a basketball at that range," Mike said. "Eight times out of ten."

Del abruptly left Doris to stand by herself. He made sure both her hands were on the handles. He lumbered the few paces between us, a big man on arthritic knees. Crinkly yellow and black hairs mixed with the red in his beard.

Del eyed me. He turned to Mike. "You're saying you could hit a target at a hundred feet."

Mike said, "The man asked. I gave him my answer."

"There was no air pistol," Del growled, "and you damn well know it."

"An air pistol can be accurate up to a hundred feet," Mike said. "Of course, it makes a big difference if the target is moving."

"There was no air pistol," Del said. "It does nobody any good to say there was."

"Roy," I asked, "did you see anyone with the air pistol during the field trip?"

"No, I didn't." Roy added, "The BB gun theory seems harebrained compared to the simple explanation."

"Which is — ?"

"Which is that Ken lost his balance and fell."

"Why did Ken lose his balance?"

"A hundred possible reasons. Insect bite. Something in his eye. He was exasperated, arguing with Suzette," Roy said.

"Was Marianne part of that argument? Did she say something to Ken?"

Roy's face turned volcanic red. "I have no idea."

"Why did Marianne not come along today?"

"She said she was working."

"What is all this palaver?" Suzette loped into our midst.

"We were just talking about your argument with Ken. Why did you call him a snake?"

"I called him a snake because he was a snake."

"What was making him a snake on that particular day?"

"He was always a snake. He was a 24-hour, nonstop snake. Worse than a Mojave Green."

"What if Ken were president. What would it mean to you?"

The question jolted Suzette. Recovering, she said, "I don't have to answer that. You're not the police."

"I'm not, and you don't," I admitted. "Are you getting all this, Roz?"

Roz looked up, making an innocent face. "I'm listening. It's all very interesting."

"Mike," I said, "would you show me where you were standing? You were on the north slope."

"That's right," Mike said. "Over by that run of boulders."

"Let's take a look."

The others watched as Mike and I walked off. Del started to follow. He went to Doris instead.

The promontory was not high enough for us to see beyond the Calico Mountains. Interlacing ridges and V-shaped valleys hemmed us inside a little world of raked-over slopes. Thousands of men wandered these hills only a few decades ago, hoping to find a vein of silver — which they would work for as long as the pickings were easy, and then sell to another man, one who had capital enough to build roads and bring in a mill and hire men to do the hard labor required before the enterprise showed a nickel of profit.

The U.S. government cut the price of silver in the Panic 1893. At the drop of a hat, prospectors of the Calico Mountains took off to join a gold rush at Cripple Creek, Colorado. The peak moment of human activity in the Calico Mountains came to an end. Echoes of that era recalled a hopeful, freewheeling, and unsustainable pursuit of happiness, far from the settled courses of life in the city.

“Right here,” Mike said. “I was pulling up rocks right about here. But there was something else you wanted to ask.”

“Del said you damn well knew there was no air pistol. What did that mean, ‘you damn well knew’?”

Mike nodded. “You’ve earned the right to ask.”

“What’s the answer?”

“Del said I damn well knew, because I was looking him in the eye when Ken fell from that cliff. I could see plain as day that he saw what happened.”

“What happened?”

“Suzette picked up a rock when she and Ken were shouting. She threw it. It hit him

dead in the eye. Down he went. I saw it. Del saw it too."

"You're telling me, Suzette argued with Ken. She called him a snake. She threw a rock and hit him in the eye. That's what happened, and Del saw it happen."

"Ken answered back when she called him a snake."

"What did he say?"

"Ken said, 'Suzette, when I'm president, say goodbye to that workshop.'"

"And then she threw the rock."

"That's right. 'When I am president, say goodbye to that workshop.'" Mike shook his head. "He brought the evil on himself, by the speaking of evil words. It was like threatening to take away a woman's children. Suzette has no children. All she has is that workshop."

"Who else knows about Suzette throwing a rock?"

"No one, as far as I know," Mike said, "except me, Del, and now you."

Mike and I walked back to the group. Del gave Mike a close look. "Where do we stand?"

I answered. "We are standing on shaky ground."

"What does that mean?"

"It means we'll talk tomorrow," I said.

"Talk about what," Roz wanted to know. "What are we talking about tomorrow?"

Doris spoke up. "I want to thank you, Del, for bringing me out here."

She took a deep breath. "The air is so clean. There's sage. I can taste it. There's freedom — unless you have to use a walker, and can no longer walk wherever you please. How I miss those days. We were young. The world was ours."

Chapter 24

Bolo Ties

The next few days were chaotic. Hurly-burly continued to roil for weeks. By the end of the year, things had settled down at the Reseda Gem and Mineral Society. I met with Uncle Luis the morning after Mule Canyon. He provided names and numbers for a police officer and a Franciscan convent in Riverside County.

First, I called Marianne. She met me on the Avalones' front porch. The ranch house lay cool and quiet in the shade of blue gum trees. There was a bench-swing made of half-round slats of red pine, sealed in many coats of varnish. You could sit there forever if you had enough lemonade.

Marianne listened as I told the story of what Mike saw that day in Mule Canyon. It wasn't pretty, but there it was. I let her know Roy would hear it from me that afternoon. Marianne could decide in the days to come what actions, if any, she wanted to take.

The meeting with Roy came together at the workshop. Vice-President Will Meyer and Treasurer Millie Zhang were present, plus Suzette Sanger and myself. On hearing the facts that led to Ken Tanaka's death, Roy laid his forehead into his palm, as if to hold back an explosion. Will Meyer gasped and stared at Suzette. Millie Zhang snapped her gaze from one person at the table to the next, sipping their reactions.

Suzette jumped to her feet, spraying and fuming. "You don't believe what he's saying. He can't prove any of it."

"It doesn't matter if I can prove it," I said. "That will be up to the police."

I pushed a business card across the table. "Officer Cabrera is the Community

Resource Officer for Reseda. In forty-eight hours, I'm going to report the circumstances of Ken Tanaka's death. You have until then, if you want to be the first to tell what happened."

Suzette protested, "You're not going to let him get away with this, are you? It's blackmail."

Millie said, "The death of an RGMS member at the hands of a fellow member... It's going to reflect badly on the club."

To his credit, Roy said to the full Board later, "Decent people can't hold together around a guilty secret."

I called Officer Cabrera two days later. She was aware of the Ken Tanaka case and was coordinating with the San Bernardino sheriff's department.

The RGMS newsletter reported that Suzette had stepped down as Workshop chair. Mike Banks was appointed to the post. His first official act was to buy six pairs of steel-toe shoes and a colorful assortment of socks — for members who came to the workshop in flip-flops.

Roz and James McCleggy clamored to know why Suzette disappeared so suddenly. Roy explained that a full-time opportunity had opened with a nonprofit conservation program. Suzette was pursuing a lifelong dream, working to preserve desert habitat for wild donkeys.

Police and sheriff's investigators concluded there was not enough evidence to refer the Tanaka case to the district attorney. In his statement, Del Musselman claimed he did not witness the events attested in the statement of Tyrell "Mike" Banks. Tanaka's father saw no reason to press charges.

Marianne agreed. "I have no desire to see Suzette in prison. All I want is to never see

her face again.”

Sally asked Marianne, “Are you going to stay married?”

“We’re talking about it.”

Marianne took Hamish’s head in her hands. She got the ever-present, happy-to-see-you look that was perfected by breeders of the West Highland White Terrier.

“We’ve got our separate lives, Roy and I, but there are no more secrets. There’s his work, my work, and a lot of brass tacks.”

“No romance?” Sally said.

“I’m past it. But we’re getting to openness. What we need, what we have to offer each other.”

“What’s the work you’re doing — for *LA Weekly*?”

Marianne nodded. “In the ambulance, when I was holding him for the last time, Ken woke up. It was only a few seconds. He was clear. He knew me. He said...”

It took a few breaths to get the words out. “He said, ‘Pinkie, finish your book.’ He smiled. It was goodbye.”

Marianne’s book gathered a series of biographical articles under the title *Valley Girls: Espiritu Leonis to Sheila Kuehl*. It sold a couple of thousand copies, mostly to libraries. It was the only authoritative, fact-checked book on its topic.

“I’ve got a question for you, Romeo,” Marianne said. “Why did Mike Banks not speak up sooner?”

“I asked him about that. His exact words were: ‘I have seen a lot worse.’”

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Edwin H. Vose II got out of the US Navy in 1921, unsure what to do with the rest of his life. He became Chuckawalla Slim, a self-styled Rockologist and proprietor of a traveling “trading post.” In the 1920s, he sold specimens of minerals out of the back of a rickety truck. In the 1930s, he graduated to a 30-foot trailer outfitted with 54 cabinets and cases, containing hundreds of pounds of noteworthy rocks.

Slim set up at tourist hotspots such as Papago Park (Arizona) during cooler months. In summer, he stayed close to home, near Pasadena, where he was a catalyst for the rockhounding hobby. Many clubs organized throughout Southern California in the years following World War II, including the Reseda Gem and Mineral Society.

The “Bolo Ties” display case was a collection acquired at the estate sale after Slim’s death in 1975. These string ties were handled like holy relics, though no one thought Slim made bolo ties. Chuckawalla Slim was a salesman. Most likely, he bought or traded for the now-classic neckware, sometime in the 1950s. That was when the braided-leather cord with a gemstone slider made its debut as a “not the necktie type” fashion statement in western specialty shops.

The standout for craftsmanship in Slim’s bolo tie collection was a lozenge of lapis lazuli in a silver-twist setting. The silver ran around the stone as a tight spiral of two wires, perfect at every turn and with no visible joinery. Margot Arrete and her protégée Vera Vasquez showed how to re-create the spiral border in a class at the RGMS workshop. Margot anchored two strands of wire in a vise while Vera clamped the opposite ends in the collet of a hand-cranked drill. With the wires held taut, and Vera cranking slowly, the spiral formed and advanced from teacher to student. The invisible connection was done by

soldering when a wire was beneath the other in the spiral.

The second most-popular item in Slim's bolo tie collection was the scorpion trapped in golden resin.

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By the end of the year, Shane Grandville had dropped out of RGMS. Linda Pradera, too, stopped coming to meetings, though Hector was still a regular at the workshop. He was getting around on a motor-scooter, or trauma-center-cycle as his mother the ER nurse called it. Hector volunteered to present a program on meteorites at an RGMS meeting. The audience loved his brash command of facts and adorable moptop.

Hector did another program, about "Dinosaur Poop" (coprolites), and another after that, "Where's Jasper?" With help from Heinrich Blatt, Hector became a paid speaker on the rockhound-club circuit.

"You see how being a student," Uncle Luis remarked, "makes you a better teacher."

Hector was aware of Missy Banks. The two became friends, though Marcus was still her main romantic interest. Missy introduced Hector to her friend Cass Etheridge, and the four of them went everywhere together in the summer before senior year.

On New Year's Eve, Sally and I watched the ball drop at Uncle Luis and Teresa's party. Teresa wore a pendant of lapis lazuli in a silver-twist setting. The spiraling silver border was copied from the Chuckawalla Slim bolo tie. The lapis was from the boulder Ed Bailey and I found not far from the town of Mt. Baldy. Ed's GIA friend confirmed the mystic blue material with gold flecks was lapis — medium quality, nothing for a jeweler to get

excited about. Nevertheless, excitement grew as RGMS members prepared for a field trip to the boulder. Ed warned there would be a couple miles to hike on a rocky streambed, and a steep slope at the beginning and end. Even so, nineteen members and guests in nine cars showed up that Saturday morning.

Sadly, or inevitably, the fabulous blue boulder had taken a beating since Ed and I last saw it. Two oval facets, each the size of a watermelon, showed where others had come and taken samples with power saws.

"Hauling a generator down here on foot," Ed said, shaking his head. "That wasn't easy."

RGMS took two more trips to the site. Each time, there were more bites taken from the boulder. "It's like the great fish in *The Old Man and the Sea*," Soapy said.

We talked about looking for the hiding place where the pirates must have stashed their generator and saws, which were absolutely illegal on the federally managed land. In point of fact, our visits too were a little under the radar.

Then we turned our minds to the bigger picture — where the boulder might have rolled from. Was there an undiscovered vein of lapis up the mountain, waiting for us to find it? It was a tall, steep, thickly forested mountain, 10,064 feet to the peak.

"It would have been wonderful to have that whole boulder to ourselves," Ed said, examining a chip of blue between forefinger and thumb. "This will have to be enough."

The news at the party was that Doris Drusenberg had passed away. "She died in her sleep, at home," Del said. "We'll miss her. She knew all the rocks and where they came from. Doris was a friend and teacher to us all."

"To Doris Drusenberg," said Del, raising his glass, "a leader of the women's

movement before there was a women's movement!"

We drank to that, and Sally said afterward, "Carrie Nation must be feeling a little overlooked."

"And one or two others," Marianne agreed.

At midnight, we drank another toast and sang "Auld Lang Syne."

*We'll tak a cup o' kindness yet
For days of auld lang syne.*

Akira Saito led us with a resonant baritone into the next verse:

*We twa hae run about the braes
And pu'd the gowans fine...*

He looked around the room, agape at revelers not singing. He exclaimed, "Ken ye nae the words, dafties?"

On New Year's Day, Lucius Tiber took his 26-foot Airstream trailer on a two-month snowbird tour of Arizona and points south. He picked up the odd rock along the way, limiting himself to three buckets, with regular sorting and discarding. During this trip, he memorized every line of *Julius Caesar*. He was going to play the title role for the newly organized Reseda Pop-Up Theatre Company. Lucius had many ideas to discuss with the director. He felt strongly that his character would not go down without a fight. He saw an opportunity to make theater history in the staging of Caesar's death.

"All-out, ninja-style frenzy against the six senatorial attackers," Lucius said when he imagined talking to the director.

"Or it could be seven attackers if we bring in Brutus' wife. What do you think?"