

A close-up photograph of a knife blade, likely a combat-style knife, with a textured, light blue wall in the background. The blade is positioned diagonally from the top left towards the center. Several splatters of dark red blood are visible on the wall, with a prominent vertical streak running down the center of the blade's edge.

MEG

GARDINER

HOOKERS, GUNS AND MONEY. EVERYBODY PAYS.

KILL CHAIN

1

Don't ever pray for insight. You're liable to get it.

Picking up the pieces, holding on to people I love, I've been able to sew the story together. It's not the story I grew up with, it's a narrative that's stitched together like emergency surgery on a catastrophic wound. Life is repaired but the damage lingers. The scar tissue is numb and deep. The family who fought to protect you stand exposed more brutally than by an X-ray.

Don't believe it. I love you, kid. Lies and all.

I wasn't there that night, when he saw them coming. But now I know.

Sunday

The rain beat down. Branches scraped his shoulders as he rushed past. He threw an arm in front of his face to shield himself, breathing hard. In the dark, he was losing his bearings. The road was somewhere up ahead.

His pursuers were behind him.

Phil Delaney ran, fighting to see, eyes swollen from the beating. His right knee wouldn't hold much longer. He had snapped the kneecap back into place after they dislocated it. When they walked outside for a smoke, he slung his foot between two beams of wood in the barn and hauled backward, like yanking on a tangled piece of string to snap the knots loose. It had worked when his high school coach did it to him on the football field all those years ago in Shawnee. It worked as fast tonight, and when the bones popped he fought down a shout and escaped through a gap in the slats of the barn. Now he was covering ground but his leg felt like a couple of straws held together with rubber bands. His adrenaline was draining away. Beneath it the pain was coming like a roar.

Behind him in the brush, he heard the dog.

Over rocks and roots, the trail climbed toward Highway 1. The dog wasn't trained to track and probably couldn't keep his scent in the wet. It probably heard him, but the only way to be quiet would be to slow down, and hell if he would sacrifice speed to gain a negligible advantage in stealth. The dog was indisputably trained to attack. The bloody bite on his arm testified to that.

Want me to call him off? Then tell us what we want to know, cocksucker.

Phil looked back. Beams from their flashlights jinked as they ran.

Of everything he had steeled himself for, this was the last thing he had expected. A dozen years since he'd been in-country. Ten since he had left the Navy. In all that time there had been no repercussions, not even a hint. And then, halfway through a spring afternoon, as he drove along a remote California highway, they ambushed him.

Why now?

Finding him wouldn't have been the hard part – over the past year, anybody watching television could have caught his face on CNN, StarNews Asia or BBC World. Though the people behind him weren't foreigners. They spoke with the flat American voices of trailer park punks.

No, these thugs were Yanks. And the one with the ratty black ponytail and goatee, the one wearing the biker boots, Phil had met his kind too many times in port town taverns: Southern Comfort and a bar fight, guaranteed. Spoiling to dish it out, long as he was fighting somebody smaller, weaker, or being held down by three other punks. But why now? How had they had put it all together, after twelve years? The op had been dirty, a disaster, but the extraction had been clean. And the only other person involved would never have betrayed him. Not Jax.

But these people knew about the connection. Worse, they had managed to track him and pinpoint his exact location on this road, today. They'd cut him off, dragged him out of the car and, as he buckled under their fists and boots, he knew the plain truth. Someone had sold him out.

Headlights swept overhead. Even out here in the back of beyond, a vehicle came past every five or ten minutes. He could keep ahead of these bastards that long. He clawed his way up the slope.

Who had known he was in Santa Barbara? The family, his son and daughter and ex-wife. His legal team, Jesse and Lavonne. And Jax.

Except that Jax wasn't here. She had never been here. The message he received asking him to meet her had been a lure.

His foot caught a rock and pain boomed up his leg. Gasping, he lunged up the trail. *Goddammit.* He was strong but he was fifty-nine

years old and hell if he was anywhere near the shape he'd been in as a young man. One more wrong step and the knee could blow, and then nothing save growing a pair of wings would get him out of here.

The dog barked, closer. They had tracked him and found him, but he wasn't the ultimate target. He had to send a warning.

The clouds parted and moonlight frosted the landscape. The brush thinned and – oh glory, he saw the road. Breathing heavily, he ducked behind a tree trunk. He couldn't break cover until he heard a car coming.

He knew what they wanted from him. They wanted what Jax had hidden. They wanted power, and they wanted destruction. Riverbend. They thought he could give it to them. And if they couldn't get it from him, he knew who they would target next. They'd go after his children and his grandson.

He had to keep his family clear. No matter what, none of them could be touched by any of this. He had spent his entire adult life making sure of that. He couldn't falter now.

Down the hill, close, a voice cried out. 'This way!'

It was the woman, the wraith with bad teeth. She had the ravenous eyes of an addict who wanted to finish him so she could get to her next hit of methamphetamine. Maybe that's why she'd kicked him in the face.

He took out his phone, cupping one hand over the display so the light wouldn't give away his position. He would never get hold of Jax or her husband. He had seconds at most. Hands shaking with fatigue, he scrolled through the names stored in his phone until he found one he hoped he could trust. Who could take action tonight.

Hell, he didn't have a cell number, just the home phone. He dialed.

A bout of noise broke from the bushes behind him. The number began ringing. Answer, man. Answer.

The dog crashed through the brush into the clear. It pulled up, staring at him, mean, panting, butt-ugly. He held still. He couldn't show fear.

The phone clicked through to voice mail. Dammit. The dog lowered its head, growling. He was going to have to run, but not before he left a message. Ten seconds, that's all he was going to get.

'It's Phil,' he began. 'I'm in trouble, so you have to do this for me.'

The dog inched forward, teeth bared in the moonlight. More noise rattled through the brush. Flashlights zigged and caught him in the eyes.

He spoke rapid-fire into the phone, laying it out. 'Do it tonight. Tomorrow will be too late. And—'

The dog advanced. Still, stay rock still.

‘You have to keep my daughter out of this. Evan cannot know. Keep her clear. Do you hear me, Jesse? If you don’t, my family becomes part of the kill chain.’

The two punks burst through the brush. Phil broke for the road.

His knee held and he erupted into the clear just as headlights swept around the curve. His heart soared. He raised his hands, waving at the driver to stop. The car braked to a halt, headlights gleaming.

Phil ran toward it. The door opened and the dome light came on, a man and a woman inside. He saw fur, diamonds, anticipation. He stopped. The woman showed her teeth, smiling in recognition. The driver got out. Young, eager, with a cocky smile. In his hand he held a gun.

‘Hello, old man,’ he said.

Phil held his ground, drawing on his last reserves of strength, getting ready.

2

Monday

Branches clawed at me. Sodden from the rain, they wept as I careered past. The brush was dense, the mud slick. A hundred feet down, the ocean bellowed, pitching itself against the rocks.

‘Evan, stop.’

I heard the alarm in Lilia Rodriguez’s voice but kept going, digging my heels into the grade to brake my descent. Morning sunlight bled through the clouds, gilding the broken saplings and gouges in the hillside that signified the fall line.

‘It isn’t safe. Wait,’ Lily called.

Above on Highway 1, flares smoked and sputtered, electric-pink. Lily’s colleagues from the Sheriff’s Department were directing a wrecking truck with a winch and two hundred feet of cable, and the Santa Barbara County Search and Rescue Team was planning its next move. When I ran down the slope they had yelled at me, too.

My foot tangled with a root and I tripped to my hands and knees. Rocks scraped my palms and tore through my jeans. I bumped down the slope, scrabbling for purchase, and slid face-first into a manzanita bush. I bundled to a stop. Behind me, Lily yelled ‘Aw, jeez.’ I sat up, heart galloping, and saw the car.

The back end was undamaged, tail-lights intact and metallic blue paint shining. It was canted skyward at a seventy-five degree angle, wheels and undercarriage exposed. The grill had wrapped around a boulder in a vile high-speed embrace.

Lily pushed through the bushes, out of breath, and stopped short. At the sight of the wreck, her tough-girl expression slipped.

Clawing to my feet, I edged down the grade toward the open driver’s door. ‘Dad.’

There was no answer. He wasn’t inside, I knew that, Lily had told me that when she came to my front door. The driver’s door was buried a foot deep in the mud. It had dug a scar down the hill during the car’s descent. Bracing my hands against it, I leaned in. The windshield was shattered, airbag deployed, the engine block jammed halfway through the front seat. A cup of 7-Eleven coffee was splashed across the dashboard.

I spun around, looking up the hillside. ‘Phil Delaney. *Dad.*’

Lily picked her way toward me. She was wearing jeans and a Sheriff’s Department jacket and a gun holstered on her hip, pixie haircut flickering in the wind. From beneath her professional stoicism the compassionate, wary kid peeped through.

‘Evan, this is dangerous. Come back up top.’

I held onto the door-frame, peering at the heavy brush on the hill. The snake of panic wound around my chest, binding me, closing my throat.

‘He has to be here, Lily. Someplace.’

‘Search and Rescue’s calling a chopper out to scan the hillside. As long as the rain holds off—’

‘He could be unconscious, or too weak to signal us.’ Tears rose in my voice. ‘We can’t just walk away.’

But I felt the tilt of the earth beneath my feet and heard the pounding of the ocean below, the greedy Pacific that fills the depths and hoards too many who fall into its grasp.

‘Come on,’ Lily said.