

NOVELLA UNO



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A PREQUEL TO
THE GOLD SUN
KACHINA

J.C. Hunt



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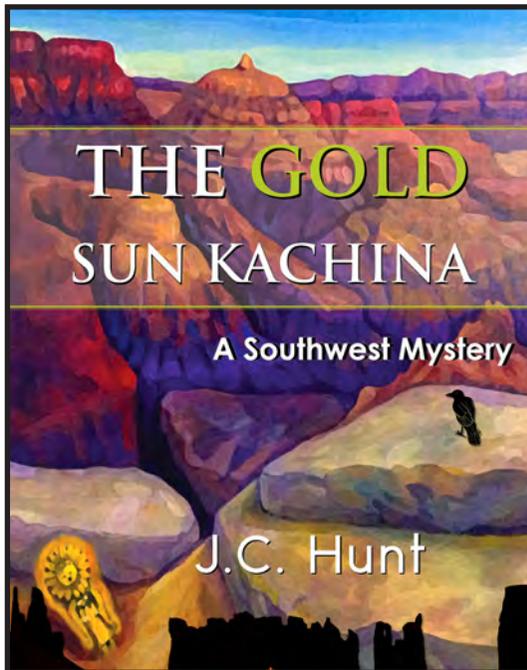
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DEDICATION

Jeanne and Francine

This novella is provided **free** as an incentive for you to take this link to my website—<https://www.jimchunt.com> where you can buy from Amazon my first book that this is the prequel to:

The Gold Sun Kachina
and then possibly others in the series?



Driving from California to Flagstaff, Arizona I'd arrived quite late, so groggily I eagerly turned into the first motor court I saw—quickly checking in and literally collapsing into bed.

Next morning after three or more cups of coffee and an All American breakfast, I eventually found myself standing directly outside of my dad's old brick building. He'd bought it in the 60's in this older downtown portion of Flagstaff. My dad had lots of great plans. A few I suppose he'd accomplished. It was a windy, cold early March day in this pine-scented northern Arizona town, but somehow looking around, everything seemed just about right. Reflected somewhat on the timing however, the "Ides of March"— it was still a few more days away, so hopefully it wouldn't be a bad omen for me.

Getting a call last week in California from my dad's attorney that he'd left among other things, this building was more than a proverbial lightning bolt—since I hadn't even been told he'd died. After a series of stammering profuse apologies from his attorney, I sort of knew where my future life plans were coming from and where I'd be going.

My ex-wife Carmela had attempted to squeeze all my assets and then some but, the timing for this new

opportunity could not have been better. Leaving the Golden State and her behind was going to be like a good douche.

I'd scheduled a moving van to bring out what clothes, books and furniture that I still owned next week. Naturally my golf clubs and gun collection were traveling with me.

What to do now that I was here was the big question mark—however, armed with the front door key, I'd soon begin to find a few things out. I started pulling the key out of my pocket when suddenly I heard a female voice behind me say, "— are you related to the man who owns this building?"

Startled for a minute I turned around then replied, "ah, yes I suppose—and I don't believe we've ever met?" Looking her over, she was rather short, had flaming red hair and was wearing a big blue Navy Pea coat, a shocking pink scarf draped snugly around her neck and what appeared to be pajama bottoms with bathroom slippers! Attractive? I suppose but, from the way she appeared in contrast to everyone else around, you'd no doubt find yourself having lots of turbulent times. She nonetheless had a certain charm about her despite her odd kept style.

"Sorry, I'm Jennifer. I'd spoken to the owner a number of times about leasing out space in his building. Last time he told me that he had a contractor working on subdividing the place. I'm a hair dresser and currently own a shop near

the university but, really would like to be located downtown. In fact right here," she announced as she pointed to the east suite and ended it with a sweeping return flourish. That drama was completed with her turning quickly back around and extending out her arm with a business card at its very end. I certainly liked her creative choreography right away.

"Well Jennifer" I said, studying the card and reading her name to myself-Jennifer Quinn, "I've just inherited this building. You were probably talking to my late father. Frankly I've just gotten into town—last night in fact. I really need to go inside and see what's actually been completed. So, right now I'm also trying to sort out my fathers estate. Couldn't give you much help just now. Possibly in a few weeks I'll have a handle on it and then I'll let you know.

"Oh, sure, sure. I understand. Well, you've got my card. Just give me a call when you get the place ready for lease," then she instantly turned and bravely ambled west up the sidewalk facing into the gusting cold wind. What the hell was she thinking? Bathroom slippers in this weather?

Already someone wanting to lease space in the building? Sounded to me like a good way to get some cash flowing in right away. But for now, I needed to see the construction progress. On the wall just to the right of the door was a building permit showing who the contractor was that my dad used. As I started reading the city permit I couldn't help but recognize the name. No other than a high school

friend of mine Teddy Begay. The same guy who'd failed shop class with me here in town many years ago. Actually we were doing OK until he tried to show me how to weld and we nearly burned the school down. I hurriedly entered his phone number into my phone directory while I could still feel my fingers.

The front door opened easily and I could readily see great piles of clutter—boards, nails, mounds of debris as I forged further inside. It smelled of a long time vacant building and at least right now, it was deathly quiet. Admittedly a heightened sense of apprehension welled up as I tried looking for a light switch. Thankfully bringing along a flashlight from my glove box helped and with a quick flick, a series of lights lit up the front area giving me at least a partial perspective of the progress. Based on what I could see or not see I wasn't sure what would be next. However there appeared to be a fully sheet rocked wall running all the way to just this side of the back door. So maybe the bottom floor was now fully subdivided? That progress would provide room for two store fronts side by side on the bottom. Decent headway it appeared!

Originally the building had been a warehouse for storing wool that would later be shipped east on the Santa Fe railroad. Since it had sat empty for quite a number of years, my dad leaped at a chance to buy it at a reasonable price. Last year I'd visited his dream and at that time the only real progress was on a gigantic bathroom he and friends had

built on the top floor. Thankfully I knew how to run the elevator near the rear that had been used to haul the wool bags up for storage and down to ship them out. Proceeding towards the back I worked my way past various dark forms of other construction material aided by my flashlight. Whatever he'd been planning, looked like progress had completely stopped months ago.

The elevator moaned gradually to life and slowly, reluctantly made its way to the second floor. Getting off, all I could see was toward the far west corner that had a window. Nearby was that beyond elegant bathroom and then across from it looked like a place where the workers had been eating their lunch. The rest of the empty space would be good for storing things—well, not stinky wool bags this time that's for sure.

Finally curiosity got the better of me and so I walked down towards the window. I decided I'd call that number I'd saved—presumably my old friend Mr. Begay might be around?

The phone rang a few times and quickly sent me to his voice mail so I said, "hey you old bastard, Bob Mckenzie here. Give me a call. I'm at my dad's old building. Would love to discuss it's status. 805-299-2398," and then hung up.

Apparently he was monitoring his calls in case it was the sheriffs office or a bill collector, because my cell phone

rang almost immediately. Seeing his name come up I quickly replied, "TR how the hell are you?"

"Mack", which was what he and all my friends always called me, "heard you might be coming to town. Sure, I could come down right now if you're not just leaving."

I laughed and replied, "I think I'm more than likely staying right here and—possibly for the duration".

"Sorry about your pop. I didn't know how to call you or I would have. Once your dad got sick he just put everything we were doing on hold. You know how he was—he just seemed to not want to tell anyone that he was hurting. I haven't been down there for at least two months. Give me ten minutes and I'll come down and catch you up."

"Yea, sure. Be waiting," and I continued to stare out the window. That I thought was just like my dad, alone at the very last but, not saying a damn word to anyone.

Apparently it seemed there were still lots of work left to get things completed.

Behind me towards the very back, I finally heard a door open and then clank shut. TR had obviously parked in the rear parking area and as he'd entered, switched on a whole

host of those floor construction lights. Promptly they illuminated everything. I should have known TR still had a key but, I'd been waiting for him at the front next to a nice warm radiant heater.

Approaching me smiling and with his hand straight out TR said, "Mr. Mack—so good to see you. Long time—couple years now." It was indeed my old high school buddy, older and fatter but a seriously wonderful sight to see.

Frankly overjoyed to see a familiar face I replied, "thanks so much for coming down right away."

The conversation continued on like that for awhile until we both agreed to forgo any more freezing and walked across the street to the Hotel Monte Vista. Sitting in their lounge we discussed the status of the renovations and what needed to be done to get both sides completed and ready for occupancy. He'd brought along the plans submitted to the city and it looked perfectly OK with me. Surprised was not the word when I found out that TR had a general contractors license. Necessity it seems had been a great motivator. I expressed to him that I wanted to get things quickly back into motion with the finishing off of the east side suite. My dad's plans were for a retail space on the west side that included the access to the second floor. He'd planned on living in the building and all the way driving from California, I knew I was going to make it my residence. It would be a home and a business-of some sort.

"Before I leave, I've always been concerned about security for the building—now and when it's done." TR announced and continued, "there's always a lot of vagrants around here looking for a place to crash, not including those looking for something to steal."

"Absolutely, that's a great point. I'll check around for an alarm company. No sense having the construction material disappear before we can even get it up."

He then replied, "Mack, most people around here are using Flagstaff Securities for their buildings, a guy named Trevor Ingraham owns the service."

The name was quite familiar, "OK—sure, I know him from when I went to school here."

Over the next few weeks progress on the west suite began to appear complete. Amazingly I saw the possibilities on my own side starting to emerge as well. The building security firm installed some motion detectors and video cameras in strategic places, as well as re-keying all of the building's locks. Hell I thought, this thing might actually take shape as we get into early May. Naturally any overt optimism usually means something is going to go wrong and today, it did.

"Why the long face," I asked as we met for an early breakfast near his house.

"Got some bad new about the workers. They've all just suddenly quit," he said not lifting his head.

"What?"

Finally looking up he continued, "It wasn't about money, at least I don't think so. The main guy just didn't want to say, just seemed strange. I'd hired them on the strength of another contractor who'd finished up a job and recommended them. I knew they were all illegal but, they sure as hell could get things done without me leaning on them."

"Alright, so where do we go from here?" He didn't look that sure of his next step or at least I waited anxiously for his reply.

He took a sip of his coffee and then sat it down. Pensively he sort of rolled his eyes and then halfheartedly said, "I'm thinking about calling my cousin on the Rez. Lots of unemployed guys bumming around out there—I might have to drive out and pick them up. Most of the difficult stuff is finished and I think I could take some raw workers and at least finish off the ground floor. Your top floor may have to wait until later in the fall, especially if you start running a store, moving in merchandise and buying trips

and all. You sure as heck don't want to miss the summer selling season."

That sudden change of heart of TR's workers seemed odd but, at the time I just passed it off without a second thought.

"Well, whatever you need to do. Give me a call in the morning and let me know where we are and aren't. I'm following your suggestion and driving down to Sedona in the morning to visit with Francie. I've been mulling over what kind of a business that I want to try. I know you've suggested something to do with Indian arts and crafts."

He was picking his teeth then he stopped and said, "why not? It's that or a some fancy golf shop? Sure, in the summer up here there is some golf action for those wanting to escape the Phoenix heat. It'd be way too seasonal to survive selling enough of that stuff. Plus most of those golfing types don't come down here very often to shop. Nah, keep it something that you know and that tourist people would like. I still have relatives out on the Rez so I could line you up with a big rug or two. However you better be careful when you're down there talking to Francie, I remember that you two had a thing."

"No trouble with that going to happen. Yes, I had a thing, but, she always seemed to be looking right past me for some other—thing."

"Well, whatever. Just remember my warning or perhaps you'll be working for her as a stock boy."

"Speaking of stock boys, we really need to get some sawdust flying around here or for sure I'll need that menial job of sweeping out her store."

"OK, I get the message loud and clear. I'll call with an update as soon as I know any more."

Bolton Traders in Sedona is situated along a road that also has a number of other chic shops. Francie's in particular stood out with its old ranch house look, and rustic stone hacienda flavor. Actually it'd been a large residential home built by a local who'd planted fruit orchards up and down the nearby mountain stream. With an old relic of a wagon and smart landscaping, it beckoned you to stop in and drop a few bills. I'd called her earlier last week and she'd accepted an offer to meet me for lunch. This would be my first time seeing her since our college days. Almost but not quite ten years.

Walking past numerous aisles of merchandise of what seemed to me of questionable southwestern provenance, I looked for where her office might be located. For just past ten o'clock it was dead, dead but then again, it was March

and the weather for them was just now beginning to draw in a decent number of visitors. Finally I saw her standing demurely outside a corner office far to the back and right then, she gave me a brief wave. OK—here we go I thought.

"Well long time no see stranger, good trip?", she said as she gave me a quick peck on my cheek. I'd forgotten her voice was her only weak link. More of a wobbly sound, but sadly for me it wasn't a fatal flaw.

"Ms. Francie, I could say you haven't changed however actually you look much better than I remembered." It was very true, she looked divine.

"Yes, and you are getting better at lying—thanks anyway. It now takes me and my hair dresser hours to get me to this stage," saying it as she pushed up her quite short hair.

We started to walk into her office when she turned and said, "I'd heard earlier about your dad. I'm truly sorry. So, do you plan on staying? Going back to the golden state? Come on in, I've asked Amy to make us some fresh coffee. Lets talk some before we leave for lunch. There's a nice kooky organic Italian restaurant just down the road—always nice."

"Thanks, a cup would be great. Just a little milk and sugar if you would. Hopefully it's not that truck driver dark roast."

She gave me a sudden look like, what the hell are you talking about but, quickly passed it off. "Now tell me all about yourself", saying it as she cozied up next to me on her couch. At that very moment a strangely attractive and delightful perfume she was wearing seemed to reach out and tug me even closer. It scared me that she was now prettier and more luscious than I'd remembered and now I appeared to be once again caught in her lair.

In spite of reassuring myself that it was in the far distant past, things were already happening—a general weakness in the knees, short palpitations, blood pressure rising and a familiar general malaise working throughout that insured I had no material defense. However, I'd resolved that I'd come down to solely talk about my business plan and needed to stay calm.

Clearing my throat I said, "I've restarted work on that old downtown building my dad had owned. Coincidentally I'm using the same general contractor, a guy called TR Begay. Went to high school with him and they've making decent progress." I didn't add that all the workers had just suddenly quit.

Avoiding looking at her I kept stirring my coffee cup, as she remarked, "sounds like you might be putting down roots back in Flagstaff then?" Thankfully, her voice kept putting me unintentionally at ease.

Buoyed by lack of eye contact I replied, "yes, and that's primarily why I've come down to see you. I've been toying around with getting into the wholesale/retail end of native American art. You see, I'd have space for a retail outlet in that building and upstairs, a few rooms for a residence—then back of that could be a large warehouse area for holding goods and possibly stock for wholesaling. As you know, my father and I used to buy things for his store in places like Gallup and sometimes in Santa Fe. Although it was a fairly small volume I admit. Now, I'd like to encompass many other areas like paintings, pottery and much more jewelry. So what do you think of that for a rough business plan?"

Almost instantly she said, "can I make an order right now?" Looking up at her expression I wasn't quite sure just what she had in mind but, I really didn't want to promote anything other than possibly my new business—at least for now. I had more than plenty of other things to do. At least I kept reminding myself of that.

"Well thanks for the blanket encouragement. This is a possibility that I'm toying with because other than golfing, I really don't have any marketable skill set.

"Oh, don't be so quick to judge," she gushed and moved even closer.

Feeling this new pressure I managed to croak out, "say—could you call and get us a table I'm already famished?"

I noticed she had a puzzled look as she glanced up at her clock. I'm sure she was wondering why at barely just past eleven I was somehow ready to eat. She paused for a moment and then shrugged saying, "sure, I'll give them a quick call."

It was while I was waiting that a text message suddenly appeared on my phone after hearing a loud beep. A few moments later I got a call from the security company that—at my back door was a man attempting to break in. They'd already called the police.

The timing seemed somehow providential. Jumping up I said, "look Francie I've got to get back up to Flag. Someone apparently is attempting to break into my building."

Driving back up I dialed TR's phone and it had hardly rang when he answered, "standing in the back right now. Looks like he tried a pry bar. Police are here but the guy must have known something because he was gone before they'd arrived. It's a silent alarm so maybe he was just

testing to see how easy it might be to get in. I'm going to order a larger reinforced metal frame just in case he or anyone else attempts to get in next time."

"Right. So is everything quiet now?"

"Well other than the two squad cars and a bunch of gawkers."

"OK, I'll be there in a few minutes."

"How did it go with Francie?"

I knew what he was insinuating so I replied, "yes, she has held her age very nicely and no, nothing happened."

"Yea sure, at least for now anyway. Park in back I'm already there."

As I went to hang up I could still hear him laughing.

By the time I arrived the police and everyone else had dispersed because only TR was standing there with the back door wide open.

As I approached him I asked, "any luck yet finding some new hands to work on the building?"

"I hope so. Called my cousin Jimmy. He's bringing four guys up later today from Piñon. Apparently a couple are carpenters or at least that's what they told him—which probably means they've possibly seen some lumber stacked somewhere but—I'm going to try and be optimistic."

"Well if you can get that east suite available by the end of the week that would be great. I've somehow lost the card that a prospect handed me. I'll need to buy a *For Lease* sign today."

"OK, I'll get the inspector to come by on Thursday. I'll go next door and go through the punch list myself today. Check the plans for your office and see if you can stop by a couple of those big box stores for your office cabinets along with purchasing that sign. Your dad had his old desk stored in the back along with some other display cabinets. We'll just wheel that desk and chair in once the door is installed."

"Fine, but I do want to drop by the police station. See what they think about this attempted break in."

TR hesitated for awhile and then slowly said, "if it was me I wouldn't. They're very efficient if they have a stone drunk person asleep on the ground—otherwise they're usually parked at a doughnut house."

Funny I thought but, probably highly exaggerated. I replied, "I'm sure you're right. I at least need to visit my dad's attorney and finish signing some papers. Call me when your laborers get to the building. You'll for sure need to run down some sleeping accommodations nearby if you can."

By late Sunday TR and his new crew had gotten the east suite ready for occupancy and were now working on my side. They'd also moved the desk and chair into what will be my office. My dad's old glass counters from our store at Gray Mountain had been pushed into place at the front—still not sure exactly where I wanted them to be permanently located. Critically however I'd already put my feet up on the desk—yes, it seemed just about right. I'd also placed in the window next door my new *For Lease* sign and felt sure that my day was finally done. That is until I heard a terrible loud and persistent knocking at the front door. TR had already taken the crew for a big meal at a local cafeteria and so the place was completely locked down. Frankly at that very moment, I'd been mulling the idea of sleeping in my office tonight.

Approaching the door I could see a red haired lady next to another woman—it was Jennifer and visibly other parts of her seemed red as well.

I hadn't opened the door more than a crack when I could hear two octaves higher than needed, "—and I thought you were going to be calling me about that space once it was ready?" Not sure if this weeks red hair was her true color but, her Irish temper was obviously showing.

Putting up both my hands I said, "hold on, relax for a minute. I couldn't find your card and really—I'd intended to not lease the space until I had a chance to talk to you again."

Her eyes bore in on me—"then what is that damn sign for?"

Thinking quickly I said, "well, I knew you'd probably like to personally remove it—as a possible memento?"

She didn't buy any of that for a second. Instantly she debunked that by loudly proclaiming, "fat chance of that being true—lets walk over right now and I'll pull it out of the window—before somebody else comes by."

Trying to steer the conversation away I told her, "well, you've not signed the lease yet, so how do you know you can afford it?" Really hoping that this wouldn't provoke her any further.

She'd obviously been around the block and then some so her reply was, "I'm sure you've checked around and will keep

it a competitive figure so I can eke out a sad but marginal living. Plus, Becky here, sorry I didn't introduce you earlier, will cut your hair for free as long as we're your neighbor. Deal?" She stared, sort of smiling and waited for my reply.

"Doesn't sound half bad, alright you've got the place once you've signed on the dotted line. Come by Monday after say about one and then you can move your stuff in after that."

I'd just left my dad's old attorney settling the estate when TR called saying in an alarming voice, "Mack, someone has just shot a hole through the west front window!"

Now, I definitely knew someone was attempting to disrupt my plans! I'd wanted earlier to go down and report something suspicious but, stupid me I let him talk me out of it. Well, not this time.

While I had him on the phone I knew we needed to get that window replaced quickly and I also needed to make a few other calls, so I said, "I'll want you to get that window replaced pronto. Go ahead and call your glass man. I'll call my insurance and see if I can get that damage covered. Probably need to call my beauty shop owner and delay her lease signing—that should be an interesting call to make. Keep your guys working on my suite, I'd like to see

it moving along even faster. For now, that's about it." TR agreed and then I hurriedly drove down to the police station hoping to see what the hell they might do.

On the ten minute drive back to my building I rang up TR meekly announcing, "you remember you telling me about our crack local police force?"

He sounded slightly amused, "yea, did they take your report so they could file it with their interoffice copies of jaywalking citations?"

Sadly he'd already known the score, "yes, pretty much it seemed like that. Apparently they didn't see any connecting dots—at least from the way I described each of the incidents. Wasn't even going to come down to look at the bullet hole. Apparently the detective surmised that it must have been from a stray bullet possibly from a local hunter up on the mountain. It was much like you suggested, they didn't seem to want to get away from their desk until they could visually see a body or two—presumably even if it's you or me."

Laughing he replied, "got you on that—not much change down there it sounds like. On another matter, glass

man came down to look at the damage or in your case the damage you're going to have to pay. He said it will be around a week to get a piece that big out of Phoenix and installed."

"Well, if that's the case I'll call Jennifer to reconfirm I'm ready to get her signature. Thankfully I'd found her card. No sense delaying getting that paperwork done and possibly subjecting me to further harassment. On another critical note, I need you to chase down someone who was on that crew that quit. We need to find out exactly why they'd left. I suspect it might be an individual who either paid them off or threatened them. Either way, I'm thinking we're going to have to investigate this thing ourselves. Concerned that whoever is involved in this seems to be escalating matters."

I'd seen where Francie had called but right now didn't seem the time to return a call. Maybe tonight I thought.

Thursday morning I got a call from TR, "I've finally got a lead on those men. It seems they're now working on a commercial building out near the south rim. I'm driving to the Canyon right now. See if I can hopefully catch them while they're at work. I'll give you a call on the way back. Let you know what I've found."

"Sounds good. I've talked to your cousin a few minutes ago about a few more things to do and I'm very pleased with him. When things wind down, I'm going to give you a bonus for him. Hopefully he's not into splurging on wine or anything."

"No, Jimmy's a pretty honest guy. I've used him on a few projects and he always goes home and pays his bills. It will help his family for sure."

"Also, when you get back I want you to consider working full time for me. I'm going to really need some help running the store and the wholesale side of the business. Especially someone I already trust."

"Sure, I'll let you know the answer right now. The answer is yes, I'm on board."

Sitting in the Monte Vista's restaurant across the street when my phone rang. It was TR. "Afternoon, what's going on?" I said hoping for something positive.

"Boss, you better get your winter clothes out. It's snowing like hell as I'm coming back. Anyway, I did get some interesting information that's for sure. I located those

workers but, I couldn't get anything out of them. Actually it finally came from a guy who works with them. Said that they'd told him that a guy named Fredrico warned them not to come back to work. Apparently a couple of them knew him from his earlier days in Mexico. He'd been an enforcer for the Sinaloa drug cartel. Get this, his nickname was *Switch Blade*—because I was told that was what he used to kill people. I know that it sounds like something straight out of a B movie." TR usually ended his minor jokes with a laugh—and right on que he didn't disappoint.

This wasn't the news I'd expected, "what in the hell. Why would he be messing around with me?"

Continuing he replied, "hard to say, I was told they'd heard he'd retired and moved to the states—but, guess where? —California."

I rolled that information around in my head a few times. The only person I knew with a deep seated grudge that was living in California was possibly my Ex. At first I thought nawh and then I thought well, maybe, possibly but, it didn't seem that probable. Recovering a little from this new revelation I asked, "did you even get a description?"

"When I pressed him he said that he was told only that he was ugly?"

Now that was a new one on me—"not sure if that's enough to tell the police to put on a wanted poster. Tall, short, beard? Something more specific?"

"I know, I know—it hit me that way also. It was probably small pox or a bad case of pimples maybe something like that when he was just a kid. My source repeated this to me that they'd told him in Spanish—*Muy Feo*. Which if you didn't know means very ugly and oh yes, no beard and he'd heard that he was short."

"Well when you get back I think we need to drive around the neighborhood looking for a car with California plates driven by a short ugly Mexican."

"Sounds like a decent plan."

By the time TR arrived a light dusting of snow was already starting to cover the city. Driving up most of the streets neighbouring my building, we spotted more than nine cars with California plates. Regretfully, I accepted the

idea that with all the out-of-state students from California that it could only be a minor aid in finding this guy. Ugliness I had to accept—was now our primary visual aid and short stature—to a lesser extent (sadly I'd even started smiling at my own puns).

All of these distractions had definitely not been on my to do list. Primarily I was aware that I needed to start getting product for the store—possibly including wholesale items at the same time. So first things first, a trip to Zuni and then Gallup for jewelry and whatever else might catch my eye. Then return back across the Navajo Reservation to where I still had a few friends at various trading posts. Hoping that they would have some old pawn, baskets and/or rugs. I was banking on them also giving me tips about anyone else with similar goods. Then thru the Hopi Reservation looking for pottery, baskets, Kachinas and the like. Depending on progress, stay over at least one night in Tuba City before pushing back into Flagstaff. Three maybe four days at most and so I knew a trip to the bank for lots of cash would be necessary. Many of these places where I was going it would be cash only transactions—keeping unnecessary eyes out of their business and to guarantee my best deal. While I was away TR would need to keep an eye out for Mr. Ugly! No golf clubs this trip, cold and golf never seemed for me to go together. I'd overheard Francie say the other day, that she belonged to a private club in Sedona. I'd like to play

after I returned—providing our spring weather would be accommodating. That thought then brought me around to remembering I needed to call her back.

Parked outside the bank after I'd gotten more than a couple of fistfuls of folding currency, I tried to call Francie. Her phone rang and rang and so I left a message and drove on back to the building to have a last chat before hitting the road in the morning.

Walking into the building I finally saw TR and waved him over. "I'm all loaded up and will drive straight to Zuni first. Keep an eye on everything—well, I know I don't need to tell you that. Three days or so for this buying spree. Call me immediately if anything seems to go bump in the night and I'll drive right back."

"Sure, don't worry I've got things here under control. By the time you return I'll have your place all finished and the permits all approved."

When I'd first arrived Jennifer was already moving her stuff in next door. Time for that free haircut? Nawh, maybe next week.

The next morning came just a little too early it seemed. I needed to spend a decent amount of time today in Zuni and then the rest of the afternoon would be in Gallup. So it was, grab your socks and get the hell going time. Zuni is a rather small native town just inside the New Mexico line, however their jewelry is particularly elegant—a clean timeless look. Gallup would be next and should provide the real bulk of what I needed as far as volume for my store. Today the weather was clear and sunny with only a hint of the small amount of snow we'd received hiding in the ditch banks and in the shadows as I hurriedly followed the signs on the interstate heading East.

Well past town I worried for TR and what Mr. Ugly might possibly have in mind for the store. Me, I could only hope for some great food in Gallup this evening and finally a decent nights sleep. My back was killing me from sleeping on that ancient sofa in my office plus it had this decades old smell of an abandoned building or worse. Either way it was destined for the garbage dump once I got its replacement.

Right then my phone started buzzing and I could see that it was Francie.

"Ms. Francie how nice to hear from you," I'd left a couple earlier calls for her and so I was relieved that I didn't owe her one back.

"Sorry I didn't return your calls earlier, I was stuck in Phoenix with some friends and hoped that it wasn't urgent. Are you coming down here today?"

"No, I'm on my way to Gallup right now. Need to go buy a few things to sell and start trying to make a living."

She paused briefly thinking about that and continued, "oh, great then, let me see if I can help. Actually I was hoping you'd start working on a few things for my store as well. I desperately need some splashy looking Navajo bracelets—vintage looking ones if possible, you know that old pawn look. Then while you're at it, if you notice some good turquoise beads with jaclas—same sort of thing, dead pawn stuff."

That old look was certainly in, "yea, I know exactly what you want. What quantities are you thinking of?"

"Hell, get me as many as you can. Ten, fifteen—stay under ten thousand for all. I know you told me cost plus twenty per cent and that's fine. Since this is your first foray

into Gallup, keep your eyes open for anything else cool. Are you also planning to go to Santa Fe or Taos?"

"Hopefully in a week or so after this trip. I've got to bring in a lot of items to have for my spring opening and to start planning for the wholesale side."

"Well, give me a ring if you see something I might like. I've got a contact in Santa Fe I'd sure like for you to visit. Sorry got a customer coming in right now—so I've gotta hang up. *A Presto!* See You Soon!"

Zuni proved to be a decent stop. Not that many big items but they were all quality. However, nothing for Francie here I concluded. My former contact in town had retired although his son and a cousin seemed more than adequate to deal with—and yes, cash was still king in town.

Driving into Gallup I decided to check into my motel room early before heading to my appointments. When going to golf tournaments it was always such a big hassle to carry your clubs up and then down flights of stairs or worse, pay the bellboy to shift them around. So I always tried to get a downstairs room for obvious reasons. Carrying my lone bag in today wasn't the issue but, lugging all my new

merchandise I hoped to buy up and back, that didn't seem much fun. I changed into a fresh shirt and then after a quick wash up, I pulled out a few things from my bag. Before leaving I slipped under my mattress the four bags of Zuni jewelry—rationalizing I'd be back in a few hours at most. No sense leaving it sitting in the pickup where I was going.

Approaching my room late and quite pleased with myself after the buying excursion, I noticed right away my room door appeared slightly ajar. Instinctively I reached for my concealed pistol and cautiously kicked open the door. Possibly an overreaction? Visually the room appeared exactly as I'd left it. Had a maid come by and forgotten to lock up? I felt under the mattress and assured myself that the Zuni jewelry was still there. A blood pressure false alarm? Right now however, I was on heightened alert. Trying to collect my thoughts I detected a vague and lingering smell of cigarette smoke. Standing up, I walked over to the only chair in the room next to the window and saw traces of ashes however, no butt. Someone it appeared had been sitting in that chair smoking, possibly waiting? I felt the ashes but, no tell tale sign of any recent heat. It'd possibly been at least an hour or more since it'd happened. Next to the ash tray were a number of deep marks that looked like a knife had made them with a downward thrust. Couldn't

really tell if they were recent or not. Was Mr. Ugly following me and in this case, impatiently waiting?

Justifiably concerned, I repacked everything and slid the jewelry back into my bag. My last two stops in town had agreed to ship my purchases directly to the store so I was conveniently traveling light. I needed to walk out nonchalantly like I was just leaving to eat (although carrying my travel bag wasn't helping). I tossed the room key on the bed, then left the table light on next to the window and closed the door casually behind me. I was going to push directly to Window Rock—sadly skipping that possible glorious supper in town. Already it was dark outside. Something definitely didn't feel right.

The rest of my buying excursion was uneventful with mostly good to great purchases at my next three stops. Just entering town and before I exited off the interstate I called TR.

"Afternoon, just approaching the store. About five minutes away. Got a few things yesterday in Tuba and a bunch before that. Gallup will be shipping the volume items any day. Anything show up yet?"

"Nah, not anything. Maybe we could just sell Girl Scout Cookies until they come. Will be great to have you back. A

little paint still drying but, its all finished on the first floor. Upstairs still needs a month or two of work. I had the guys move all our tools and supplies into the unfinished space and so I've let them all go for now."

I hadn't been concentrating on much until I felt and heard a sharp loud bang against my pickup and then I desperately fought for control and——

"Well looky here, he's starting to open up his eyes" I finally began to realize I was hearing TR talking to me. It was then that I knew also that I was laying in a strange bed somewhere and feeling exceptionally numb. Like I'd been given some sort of pain killer medicine but, like way too much.

"Come on you can do it," was another familiar voice—a female voice from my past. It sounded just like Francie.

Finally I began to open my eyes even wider and recognized the two people now leaning directly over me. What the hell I wondered?

TR was smiling his normal dumb-ass smile and said, "you've had a little accident. Well truthfully you had a big accident. I'd gotten a call from a police sergeant I know who told me that you were being taken to the hospital. Apparently they'd figured you'd lost control coming off the

interstate. Kind of rolled that nice new pickup of yours—I did salvage everything that I could. The pickup is well—toast," He explained as they both leaned over even closer.

At first I couldn't even seem to croak out much of anything. Finally the first thing that I did mutter was "—how long?"

Smiling he grabbed my hand, "you've been out of it ever since the accident—so little over a half day—not that long."

Relieved that it wasn't like a week or so—I just had to tell him, "someone bumped me from the behind. Kind of a like the cops do in a PIT maneuver—then I tried to control it...."

Francie worried that I was possibly getting too agitated so she touched my forehead slightly saying, "take it easy, don't try to talk too much."

TR appeared confused about what I'd just said, "huh? The cops thought you'd just somehow lost control. They took a blood test to make sure you hadn't been drinking. Hope you don't mind but, I gave them permission since you were unconscious."

"Bastards, —" I was still struggling to talk. "—go look at the drivers side of my pickup and take some pictures. Should be some noticeable slight damage in the rear and hopefully a bit of their paint where they'd bumped me."

Nodding he said, "Sure Boss I understand. I'll do it as soon as I leave. We were told not to stay too long anyway but, I'll be back after lunch to give you an update."

Francie broke in saying, "is there anything I can do?"

My head reeled with all the things I wanted to ask her to do but, in my current state it wasn't possible. "No—no I just need to begin to get off these damn pain killers and get out of the hospital. Tomorrow for sure. Don't feel like anything is broken so that's the main thing."

She leaned over giving me a quick goodbye kiss that reeked with the smell of that good stuff of hers. I felt right then I was getting better—by the moment.

"I'll be back later also," she said giving me a little wave as I closed my eyes and then I heard the door to the room gently close. That would be nice.

It was a day later than I'd wanted before they'd released me. Reluctantly I admit that I needed that extra day. Before being discharged TR did find the damage on the pickup and he'd brought photos to the hospital along with the officer from the accident scene. After taking my statement and reviewing the evidence, he changed his report from Failure

to Control the Vehicle to a hit and run. He also concluded that I was neither intoxicated or otherwise impaired. My insurance company and I were relieved, at least I sure as hell was.

Right from the time I regained my consciousness, I suspected it was my friend Mr. Ugly. With no physical proof at all, I didn't want to bring it up to anyone but TR—at least not yet. I told TR about the hotel room incident in Gallup and in conjunction with everything in the past, we both agreed that there were way too many coincidences for it to not to be somehow connected. I reminded him that whatever I was going to do or whatever we saw, Francie or anyone else didn't need to be told or especially involved.

I wasn't going to wait around to let my primary suspect run me over, shoot me or whatever else bad he had next in mind. It was now time to take the offense and find this bastard or bastards as the case may be and get it behind me—as soon as possible.

Sitting alone in my office I decided that the opening of the retail shop would have to just wait until I'd sorted out this persistent issue. I didn't intend or need any police help, we'd find my nemesis Mr. Ugly all by ourselves.

"TR", I called out of from my office.

He was unpacking a box of jewelry from the buying trip answered, "what's up?"

"Come on in here for the moment, I need to discuss a number of things. So for now, stop whatever else you're doing."

As he entered I motioned for him to take a seat and announced, "at least for the next couple of weeks if necessary. I want us to focus all our efforts on finding this Fredrico, Switch Blade or as I prefer—Mr. Ugly."

"Probably a damn good idea," he said noticeably still sitting on the edge of his chair.

"Well, I'm realizing that to continue to somewhat ignore him is most likely going to get me killed. What again did you say was the color of the paint you and that detective found?"

"It was like a light grey—got a couple pictures here on my phone in case we need to put it up against anything we find. I'll send you those pictures right now," he said as he fumbled with his phone punching a number of buttons.

Rising up I said, "well, until we nail this guy, it might be a good idea for you to be carrying as well. With a name like *Switch Blade* he most likely won't want to just sit down and

chat. I'm going to want us to be prepared to shoot him if he makes any weird moves."

TR took a long minute to reply and when he did he seemed to drag out every word, "I understand boss, but it might be better if we don't try to confront him directly—if we can avoid it. I could call that detective you first talked to and alert him as to what we're doing.

Surprised by more than a little, I slunk back down in my chair and said, "if you're that apprehensive, maybe it would be best for you to just stay here. Me, I'm not waiting for trouble—if someone wants to screw around with me, I'm prepared to give them that opportunity."

"No, no, I didn't mean that—I'm with you. I'm just saying that if we locate his car it might be better to let the police investigate it from that hit and run aspect. Possibly during their interview other things might drop out as to just exactly why he's in town in the first place."

"Well, you're more optimistic than I am about their new found investigative abilities. Right now after spending a few days in the hospital I've decided that being a victim is not who I am. I play golf to win not to get second place. Same way here, if he wants to play rough then he found someone who appreciates that challenge." I pulled out my two pistols placing them on top of the desk. "They're fully loaded and this knife is bigger than any lousy switch blade," saying it as

I pulled out my Bowie knife from my boot and laid it also beside both of them. Every day this spectre persisted in the shadows, I felt the pressure building up to finally put it way behind me, permanently.

TR's eyes glanced down at the array of assembled hardware and returned his gaze to me with a noticeable worried look. "Well, OK. I can understand your frustration. But Mack, I'd prefer we ease into this investigating thing—before we possibly drill a hole in someone who might possibly be innocent." I'd realized earlier that this was more my problem than his but, until the matter was resolved the business for all of us couldn't realistically move forward.

Clearing my throat I said, "understood but right now I'm fed up with waiting for his next move and then try and react too late to it. Better that we hit the streets right now," and gave him an arm wave showing him I was leaving—immediately.

For the next three week we drove all over Flagstaff looking for a light grey car/pickup or even a truck with California license plates. Either the phantom had left town or the car was simply stashed securely down a driveway out of view or even hidden in a small garage.

During this same period, Francie called multiple times asking just when I was going to have my grand opening. Tempting me also with a weekend of golf at her club and

what sure sounded like a sleep over. Tantalising as it was, I thanked her every time for her concern but repeated to her that it was fairly normal to have various startup issues. Although she really never sounded quite convinced. Actually she seemed overly worried. Yes, I actually did go next door and to get my free hair cut— also a scalp massage while watching the ladies get their hair done.

At the office one day I frustratingly said, "We've obviously gone all over town, not just where all the affluent people live but—for instance many times over into East Flag. Maybe for lunch we should drift back over in that direction—make it also a somewhat more useful trip?"

TR eagerly jumped at that hint, "do you mean stop by that Mexican food restaurant just a few blocks off the highway." His quickly improving mood and broad smile brightened up the room.

Baiting him further I replied, "like the La Fonda?—sure, let's hurry and get going before the lunch crowd shows up." My vigilante spree had gone on for almost a month without any signs of someone that I'd never ever seen. Probably time to wrap it up. Frankly I was ready to accept that he was in California or some other place and I wanted to get on with my new life.

As usual finding a parking spot was already a problem even though it was just past eleven. "They need to buy a few homes around here and tear them down for parking spots," saying it almost too low for human hearing.

"I'll be sure to leave a big tip this time—help them get it started," he said laughing as he closed his door."

Inside the mood was busy, busy with a small line of people and waiters rushing around. The place hadn't changed since I was in college. Comforting that time hadn't even made a dent in the looks of the place. We were being escorted to a far back booth when I happened to notice three Mexican customers seated to my right as I was passing by—in fact I stopped completely in my tracks. Here was that son-of-a-bitch sitting right between his companions I said to myself. Turning I felt for my pistol in a quick reassuring brush and said directly to the pock marked bastard, "Fredrico so good to see you."

They'd been chatting but now all three looked up and the man I'd addressed had this rather surprised look saying calmly, "sorry senor, but do I know you?"

Not accepting this ploy I replied very loudly and immediately, "I'm pretty fucking sure you do. You've been hounding me for a couple of months now."

His friends on either side tried to rise but Mr. Ugly put out his hands and once again coolly replied, "no senior, you've obviously mistaken me for someone else." Then he gave me a rather sardonic smile that reassured me that indeed he was —the guy.

TR standing beside me grabbed my arm and said, "lets not make any trouble in here." Then quite soon the manager who'd been hearing from the waiters about trouble came walking back and asked that we leave.

Outside I kept telling TR that it definitely was Mr. Ugly but, he wasn't quite convinced saying, "he sure seemed adamant that he didn't know you. Hell, we've never even seen a photo of the guy. Frankly he seemed genuinely surprised. Mack, I'm not convinced."

Ignoring his comments I turned to him and said, "come on lets drive down the block and park. I want to see where they go and if they're driving a California car and with that paint color. Possibly he's even parked it in back of wherever he's been staying."

"Sure, be happy to," and TR drove to a grove of leafless elm trees nearby but, still with a direct view of the La Fonda.

It took about an hour of waiting but finally the three emerged and got into a red Chevrolet pickup. Following them we didn't have to go very far from the restaurant

as they parked directly in front of a small paint peeling wooden house. Noticeably the place backed up to a commercial building that had no visible backyard or driveway. I couldn't see any other vehicles but, now—I had his god damn address. I had TR drive by the house a few more times—I couldn't see any further activity.

"What do you want to do now boss," he asked?

"Let's go back to the office for now. I need to think on this." I suspected that since Mr. Ugly realized I'd made him, that he'd be coming for me quite soon. I'd rig up the building for silent alarm, make a pot of hot coffee and wait for the bastard to come creeping around. Each night for the next few weeks I resolved that this night was the night but, it always ended up the same—nothing. Every day, TR would remind me that he was right and so it went until it seemed that we really did need to finally open up the store.

The stores grand opening was held on the first of June with a local Mariachi band. We gave away a huge pile of Mardi Gras beads. Actually it wasn't bad at attracting people although in this case, it attracted mostly college kids who are super quick to sniff out anything free. Uneventful days flew by afterwards especially after I took a few trips to Santa Fe and then a separate rug buying trip around the

reservation. By late summer I actually felt like I back in the old groove.

It was almost closing time when TR said, "say boss I'm going to leave just a bit early. Got a hot date with that nurse from the hospital."

"Well I'm sure glad I could help," I said laughing and patted him on his back as he exited out the rear door. I decided to walk out and saw him drive off. A car suddenly skidded to a halt and then I could hear loud footsteps approaching. Looking back, it was of a man running towards me with a knife—the man from the La Fonda, aka Mr. Ugly. Slamming the door behind me but with no time to throw the bolt, I started running back towards the front. Stupid me, I'd gotten so complacent that I'd quit carrying my gun. Obviously he was smarter than me because he'd caught me completely off guard. I heard him right behind me saying something but I obviously wasn't going to stop and listen. Running into my office I locked the door and panicked while reaching for my cell phone. It dropped to the floor skidding under a chair. Concurrently, Mr. Ugly had no trouble kicking open the thin office door. Noticeably he was enjoying switching his knife from hand to hand while wildly grinning. Desperately I scanned for anything close at hand. In the corner of my office were my golf clubs and so I grabbed the first club I could reach. As I did, Mr. Ugly reached across the desk and stabbed me in the shoulder. Pulling it out, he moved around the side of the desk to

continue. That was when I savagely struck him as hard as I could in his head with that golf club. The club's face lodged deep into his right eye and he immediately let out a terrible scream. Turning he gave out a deep moaning sound while dropping the switchblade, then collapsing completely to the floor.

Even though bleeding profusely, I needed answers so I rolled him over and shouted, "who's paying you—why are you doing this?" Dark red blood slowly came gurgling out of his mouth as he mumbled something undecipherable, that frustratingly—was it.

Later after the ambulance arrived and they'd loaded him on the gurney the attendant studied the club that was still stuck in his head and asked me "—so what in the heck did you use?"

For some reason it seemed a plausible question, "it was the only thing I could reach. I think it was the One iron."

He grimaced and paused considering my reply.

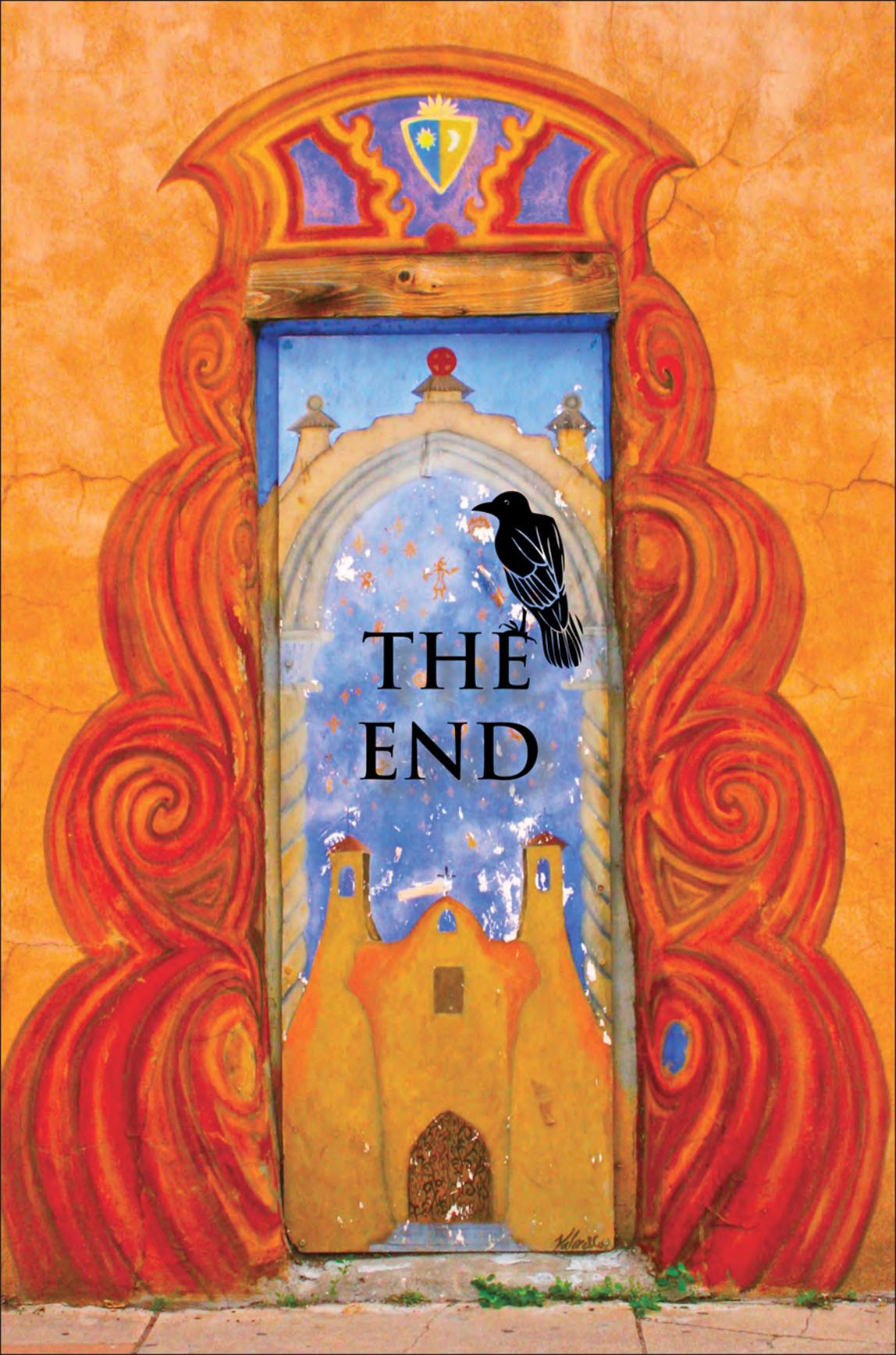
I did think about that as well. Probably in all my years playing it was the only club that I'd never used. Lee Trevino the famous golfer used to say that even God couldn't hit a

One iron. Maybe so, but after this, I intended to keep one in my bag from now on.

Much later I learned that Francie had been alerted by TR that I though I'd found Mr. Ugly—he was seriously concerned about what I might impulsively do. She decided to take matters into her own hands and called a friend in Phoenix who had connections. Apparently that same night that I'd spotted him, ICE mysteriously made a raid at that address and Mr. Ugly was subsequently deported to Mexico. So even though he could and should have stayed safely down there. Why did he feel compelled to finish the job?

In a crazy way I admired his dedication, some sort of assassins creed? Still don't know who he was working for or why. TR and Francie never brought the matter up again. I wanted to tell them that I was right all along but—then again, they knew it.

The End?



THE
END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Raised in Northern Arizona, Jim worked for his father on the Navajo Reservation at Greasewood Trading Post primarily in the summers and graduated at Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff, Arizona with a degree in finance and business. After a stint in the U.S. Navy during the Viet Nam War, Jim soon moved to Dallas, Texas where among others he worked for a couple of large national/international real estate companies. Recently returning to Arizona to pursuing a degree in driving a Jeep. Now roaming the rugged Arizona back country searching for those golden sunsets and any rare native plants.

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