

CHAPTER 3

On the beach stood a home along the rocky and precarious yet revered coast of Malibu, California. The rear section of the house that was on the beach was perched on stilts. The remainder was built into the hillside that bordered the Pacific Coast Highway where cars whizzed by in a never ending swoosh of sound.

Below, the ocean offered stereophonic harmony for a total effect of man and nature side by side.

Tucker Spence sat on an adirondack chair softly cushioned in navy and white chintz. He sat on his deck over the beach, looked at the silver lined ocean and contemplated the vast distance between his past and present, his life and his future. Gulls swooped and pelicans dove for dinner but he ignored them and at the same time envied their simplistic requirements.

He looked at his watch and rose.

She would arrive shortly.

Downing will collect Lydia Colemar at the airport. He would then take her to meet him at a designated place that represented neutral ground.

He waved his hand against a thermal panel and a glass door slid open. He entered the house and changed his clothes.

Twenty minutes later he was on the Pacific Coast Highway, headed south.

RUBIN---31  
THICKER THAN BLOOD

He noticed the time.

*She's here.* Downing met her and drove her to the restaurant.  
Should I have met her plane?

Too personal, too soon. No. Better this way. No involvement.  
Clean. Give her the facts and that's it.

He was prepared. He'd waited three weeks to call after he saw the cabin, offered to buy the cabin. He'd waited, thought about it that long and then called her.

What will she would be like?

Lydia was the best friend of his high school sweetheart, Claire Optin, best friend to the woman that he once planned to spend the rest of his life with.

It didnt work out that way. Things happened. He landed in Arizona with a summer place at the beach in California.

Who thought that one night so long ago between best friends could have such lasting effects?

"Such lasting effects. Why did this have to follow us?"

He drove and listened to the transcom.

"Today in history, July first, 2023. The first successful brain transplant using lazer cranial retachment theories took place in 2015 on this date at Johns Hopkins Hospital. And on this date twenty years ago, once great football star Red Audridge was convicted of the double murders of his teammate Sonny Jansen and his wife Tricia Jansen. It was the case hailed as the trial of

the century. It was two days later that Audridge bashed his own head against the rails in his cell and killed himself. Also on this date . . . ."

"That fool!"

Tucker Spence pressed a button to switch to music. It filled the transport with strains of violins and flutes.

Maybe if I considered murder a viable solution all those years ago I wouldn't be in this situation now.

*And my cellmates may have been none other than the likes of Audridge.*

He headed south on the freeway. Tucker brought the transport to a comfortable cruising speed and returned control of the vehicle to the computer, watched the grid on the travel panel change rapidly as he neared the designated location.

All around were the sights and sounds of a city alive with people. Transports whizzed by him, air transports could be seen from the tri-level freeway system above.

The sky was azure, the palms emerald and crystalline sunshine was brilliant. The transport's sunscreen activated, the windshield protected his eyes.

I should have known better. The old adage to be careful of what you wish for is true. Except that, if I had murdered her then I'd be out by now, time done and life simple again.

Tucker rubbed his face, wondered what Lydia would be like.

He looked in the consol and studied his face.

His features were angular yet refined. His grey hair was still abundant even though it was turning white. It was long and wavy, much like he wore it in his teens and twenties, so long ago. His skin was still strong, pliant. The strength of his jaw held and his blue eyes gazed at the world with deceiving pensiveness. His neck had the signs of age but his physical conditioning kept it from being a dead giveaway at first glance.

So long since I've seen her.

She'll know me.

And what about her? She had been so beautiful, so like Claire, who was his girlfriend at the time.

Time played tricks. It was the other way around. Claire made herself to look like Lydia.

Did Claire know or sense that it was Lydia that he was so infatuated with? Ah, the mistakes of youth. How long do we pay for them? Such innocence! Was it really fifty-three years ago that they'd first met? How can that be?

Tucker pictured the day, the place, the time, the exact moment when he and his best friend Matthew Valadine saw the two girls.

That was the day that he first knew Claire, first sensed that his life would change because of her. *Had I only known. Good God, my life would be different.*

Tucker noticed the coordinates board and knew that it was time to take over the computer and control the transport himself.

They can put penal colonies on the moon and save the world from criminals but they can't change history, can they? They can't take back the way things were and they can't rewrite the present or the future. I only hope it isn't too late.

Tucker turned the transport into the lot and then pushed the exit button. The doorway swung up and out. He exited.

He walked into Il Pastaio and waited a moment for his eyes to adjust to the dim interior.

A man approached and greeted him.

"Mr. Tucker. So nice to see you today. Will you join us tonight for dinner?"

"Yes, Spence party, Tory, you old dog."

Tucker never bothered to correct Tory, knew it was a humourous affectation between them. He was called Mr. Tucker.

Tucker shook Tory's hand and Tory adopted a thickly accented Italian bravado. There were occasions during which his voice would become fluid and melodically French if the name of the place was Ma Maison, Greek for that ethnicity. It was foolish but harmlessly transparent.

Both knew it.

"Of course. Your chauffeur is at the table and he waits for you. Im sure he has your companion well within conversation to

RUBIN---35  
THICKER THAN BLOOD

pass the time. And such a lovely companion, eh? Shall I order wine now or wait until you've had time to peruse the day's offerings?"

"My usual selection will be fine."

"A fine choice. This way please."

The tall maitre'd led Tucker into the soft darkness of the large room. Tucker followed Tory around tables and booths crowded with dinner guests.

He saw his driver, Downing, pleasantly engaged in conversation with Lydia.

Lydia stood and Tucker took her hand, hugged her. Her perfume drifted lightly to him.

"You are lovelier than ever, Lydia."

He bent over her hand, smelled the scent of her skin. Her manicured fingers were slender and long, well maintained and feminine.

He'd forgotten the details of her but savored this moment as much as the first time that he'd seen her in the hallway of the Elkins Park Junior High School in Cheltenham, Pennsylvania in September of 1967.

This was just as momentous.

"Tucker. So good to see you."

She returned the gaze and her voice was husky, soft.

Downing stood.

At six feet four, Downing dwarfed his employer by three inches although he was only twenty nine years old. A huge man roughly the size of a bookcase, Downing was gentle and solicitous.

"At your service, Boss," he said.

His voice had a raspiness but was gentle and soft. With a shock of light red hair and freckles all across the bridge of his beefy nose, he motioned to a chair for Tucker.

"I'll leave you to it if that's all you need now, Boss."

"That's fine, Downing. Thank you. Please ask the valet to return my transport to the garage on PCH and come back for us at--" he looked at his watch and added, "--ten forty five."

"You got it, Boss. Nice to have met you, Mrs. Colemar. Enjoy your meal."

Downing offered a slight bow.

Lydia nodded.

"Thank you, Downing, it's been a pleasure."

The large man turned and was gone.

They sat. The wine arrived. They looked at each other for a long time, couldn't do anything but let the decades fall away.

"You look good, Tuck, really good."

"And you! You take my breath away."

"Really! Lets not get carried away."

She looked away and fluffed her hair.

He took her hands in his and gently held them.

She did not remove them.

Their eyes roamed from hair to eyes to lips to neck to fingers to dress to smile. They lingered over a deep look into the eyes that confirmed that they both remembered. They had been young together, once and long ago.

So much to say, too much to think.

"Truly a joy to see you again," he said. "I was remembering the first time I saw you that day at EP during my drive here."

Lydia laughed a liquid and languid splash that rushed through him as a fond memory can be savored and tasted.

He suppressed the urge to hug her again. But she felt like football games and The Doobie Brothers to him! Her hands brought back mittens and mugs of hot chocolate on Super Sunday in Center City, jeans and sneaks at Curtis Arboretum. It was hard to think straight. He was assaulted with images of Old York Road Skating Rink and parties at the Delta House, concerts of the Grateful Dead at the Spectrum, the beach in Ventnor, New Jersey. Places he hadn't thought about nor remembered in as many years since he'd been there.

But that wasn't entirely true either, was it old boy?

"Tucker? You still with us?"

"Huh? Oh, yes, sorry. You were saying?"

"Yes, I remember. You couldn't get a word in edgewise, could you?"

"No. And you had every boy in town going at each others' throats over you."

"Go on!" She smiled.

Carrying books in the hallway. Lockers. Winter coats and listening to WMMR on his car radio. Orange Camaro, white racing stripes.

"Well, certainly Matt and I, that's for sure," he said.

"That's what started all this, you know."

Their hands dropped apart and they picked up menus.

"I do know," he said. His tone became heavy, laden with the weight of time, time and all that came between then and now.

They were silent as they looked for clues and ques, nuances that were old, habits that were new.

"Forty years," she whispered.

"A long time, a very long time."

The sparkle in her eyes are the same. *I'm in trouble.*

"And yet it went so fast," she said. "all of it. How did that much time slip by us? Why did we let that happen?"

"Because it was too painful."

"I know that but it seems so senseless after all this time."

He nodded his head and shrugged.

"It hurt Matt terribly even though it was all so ugly," she

said.

"It couldn't be changed."

"He loved you. Till his last breath, Tucker, he loved you. His last words weren't for me or her. They were for you. It was in his will. He wanted me to explain it all to you."

Everything? Tucker closed the menu. *Finally!*

The waiter approached and they ordered. When he left Tucker sipped wine and buttered bread, handed a piece to her.

When she accepted, their fingers touched. The feeling went from his finger to his brain non stop, do not pass go, do not collect two hundred. *I'm in big trouble.*

"He died over ten years ago," Tucker said. "Long time to delay honoring your husband's last wish."

She winced just enough for it to be noticed.

The waiters bustled all around them. Glasses clinked and conversations drifted like a breeze.

"I couldn't call you."

It sounded like a confession issued in a dream, uttered in a soft whisper like dust from the cover of an old photo album, blown away so the inscription could be read.

He looked up at her.

"Why not?"

"It had to come from you. I told you that night that whatever happened, it was your move."

RUBIN---40  
THICKER THAN BLOOD

"Forty years! If I had never called would you have taken it to your grave?"

She sighed as a salad was placed before her.

She's so sad! What does it mean?

"Why?", he asked.

"If you wanted me in your life you would have found a way."

It was barely a whisper, now no more than dusting powder floating away. It's scent was old.

He dropped his knife and it crashed on the plate with all the force of lost years, so final, so relentless. Irrevocable, the lost years, the slam on the plate by the knife.

Her eyes were wide, waited and yet were windows to her soul. They cried out to him in their silence, screamed that she was still there, remember her?

He looked away, looked to the ocean as it crashed with relentless formality against the helpless beach. So defenseless, so vulnerable.

Hurt! So sad! My move? I never knew, never thought . . . .

She waited? Carried on but waited? All this time!

He took her hands, around the butter dish and the wine goblets, pushed the centerpiece aside, he took her hands.

She smiled.

"Hi, Tuck."

"Hi, Lyddie."

RUBIN---41

THICKER THAN BLOOD

The tears that welled in her eyes broke his heart.

Wasted years!

*I'm in trouble big time. . . .*