

[This chapter still survives in Chasing Clay, but in a much abbreviated form to save word count. This is the original, full-length version.]

Chapter 17

49 DAYS LEFT

The next five days melt into one very long one.

I work sixteen-hour days in the Bel Air house and sleep on an air mattress in one of the guest rooms. The original cork floor was ruined, so right now there's a bare cement slab under the mattress. I figure this is penance for my past sins.

The interior's at that point where it looks hopeless and the architect (me) wants to open a vein. The plaster patches are still raw sores on the walls. The kitchen's gutted, the old wallpaper and cabinets are in the dumpster, the old appliances have gone off to somebody's house in Lancaster. Half the new cabinets are in boxes outside the garage; the other half are somewhere between Moreno Valley and here, though nobody knows where. The six-burner Viking cooktop won't arrive until Monday. There's stacks of tile boxes in the garage.

"Still no cold water in bathroom three," Royce tells me as we do the first walkthrough of Friday morning after I arrive straight from LAX. Three's the bathroom between bedrooms three and four.

"What'd the plumber say?"

"He's talking about tearing out walls."

"Hell, no. We don't have time. Six days, remember?" We stop at bedroom four. The floor's covered with cream berber carpet. Every bit as exciting as it sounds. I rub at the headache from last night's drinking. "No go on the cork?"

"Yeah, if we had four to six weeks. Say 'yes' to this and we'll have the bedrooms done by Monday."

A truckload of goats arrives at eleven. They're here to eat the weeds on the hillside. For the next six days, I hear *mehebeh, mehebeh* all day.

Who thought this was a good idea?



The dog's name is Feo. That's Spanish for "ugly," which is kinda harsh. He's what happens when a black Lab and a Rottweiler get wasted and sneak off into the bushes. When he's not flopped on my feet at my makeshift desk in the garage, he follows me around, panting. I asked for this, didn't I?



"What kind of problem?" I ask Olivia. It's our bi-hourly call. I'm sitting on a crate full of landscape lighting fixtures. I'm not sure why they're not in the ground already.

"The museum executive you wish to meet doesn't wish to meet with you."

Fuck. How'd I know this was coming? "Does he know it's not optional?"

"I don't believe he's been informed yet. Allyson knows. She's the one who can twist arms; I'm merely a voice on the phone."

"Is she going to twist his arm? If he bails, this whole thing falls apart."

"She's aware of that. What she chooses to do about it is her decision, I fear."

I stifle the urge to scream. "Do you have anybody at the Norton Simon or the Pacific Asia Museum? In case you can't get this guy?"

"Unfortunately not. Will an extra do?"

Meaning, a fake museum guy. "No. The mark'll check him out and it'll be 'game over.' We've gotta get the LACMA guy. Tell Allyson she's gotta make it happen."

"I can't *tell* Allyson anything." She pauses. "Well, I *can*, but I can't make her listen."

It never rains... "Do what you can."

"I always do."



Crates have been dribbling in from Boutelle's pals ever since Tuesday. I sign—or, Mike Harmon signs—for two more on Saturday morning.

I'll have to send back the first one. I doubt even Savannah or Bandineau will buy that I have Van Gogh's *Starry Night* on my wall. Either Boutelle didn't tell this artist the rules, or the artist didn't listen. It's a damn good copy, though.

The second one's after Johan Barthold Jongkind, a Dutch pioneer in Impressionist landscape. It's a moody nighttime view of a 19th century harbor with the moon glowing behind scattered clouds; the same idea as Jongkind's 1872 *Vue sur la borwede Amsterdam*, but different. Whoever painted this is real good.

Hoskins' at-home collection's up to seven pieces. Not enough. I slide the pseudo-Jongkind back into its shipping carton, step into a pool of morning sun in the forecourt, and think again about Hoskins' narrative. Then I pull my personal phone and thumb a contact.

"Hello?" It kills me to hear an old-lady voice come out of her.

"Hi, Mom. It's Matt. How're you doing?"



Olivia says, "What's the difficulty with the maids?"

"They're all hot."

"I reckoned you might appreciate that."

"Normally I would, but it's not what I need this time. I need an enforcer, somebody who can kick people out of places they shouldn't be in. It'd be nice if she can cook, too."

"This precludes her from being attractive?"

Feo waggles up to me. Eighty pounds of dog leans against my kneecaps. I give him a pat. "Have you seen *From Russia with Love*?"

"There's not a British woman over forty who hasn't seen that film. Please, I beg of you, tell me you want to recruit Sir Sean for something."

"Sorry. Who would scare you more—Eva Longoria or Rosa Klebb?"

Olivia's quiet for a moment. "I understand. I'll sort it."



A serious art collector will have a serious picture-hanging system. You don't slap a five- or six-figure canvas up on a cheap little wall hook. We used the Griplock system at the gallery, and we messed with it enough that I can probably qualify as an installer. So I'm installing it in the hallways, the larger painted walls in the living and dining rooms, and in Hoskins' office. The electrician will mount the track lights and security cameras tomorrow.

Royce gives me Andrés to help. Late fifties, a lot of miles on his face and hands, but still hustling even though I can tell his knees and hips are giving him hell. He's wearing dad jeans, a long-sleeved orange tee, and a tool belt with almost as much wear on it as he has.

From the moment I meet him, I know I've seen him somewhere before.

As we position wall track in the hallway leading to Hoskins' office, it comes to me: I've not only seen Andrés before, I've worked with him. Twenty-some years ago, on a strip mall my dad was building.

He was a lot younger then, taller, faster. The guy who always had some crazy story to tell. But he was a primo finish carpenter and he taught me a lot. Now he's here trying to scratch out a few bucks, like Dad does. Neither of them should be doing this work anymore, but it's all they know and all they can get.

I call a break I don't need but he does, and ask him in Spanish, "Can I get you something to drink, *viejo*?" Meaning *oldtimer*.

"*Si, patrón, gracias.*" And I can see in his eyes that he's trying to place me.

While I get water from the battered yellow Igloo cooler, I wonder if I should tell him. We used to get along pretty well. I remember he had a wife and a baby boy. What happened to them? Is he alone now, like Dad? Did the crash wipe him out too? Is that why he's here, an old man doing a young man's job?

He thanks me when I hand him the cup of water. "We have met, I think."

Saying *yes* would mean talking about the past, and Dad, and what happened to him and the business, and where I went and what I did. "I thought so too, but, no. Not that I recall. Ready to get back to it?"



The furniture trucks start rolling into the forecourt at nine sharp Monday morning.

I had the luxury of putting my air cushion on brand-new berber carpet last night. It felt great after a 140-mile round-trip to Riverside through rush-hour traffic to bring back something more precious than anything else I'll put in this place.

The construction's about ninety-five percent done, though the punch list I'm hauling around on my phone has eighty-one items on it by lunchtime. The landscapers are planting the last of the new foliage all around the house. Royce tries to deconflict the work crews and the movers while I play traffic cop, pointing each piece of furniture in the right direction.

Feo gave up trying to chase the goats and started trying to help move furniture, so he's locked in the garage now and howling about it.

Two hours later, I'm on the phone with Olivia. "About a third of my furniture is missing."

"I'm aware of that." There's a rasp in her voice I've never heard before. "Your list was very... specific. 'Specific' isn't always possible on a limited schedule."

"I gave you alternatives for almost everything."

"Yes. Those were also very specific. Quite frankly, I'm gobsmacked I've found as much as I have."

I'm sitting in a dining-room chair—for something that looks good, it's surprisingly comfortable—and staring into the kitchen, where two guys are frantically putting up the mosaic-tile backsplash. The counters still aren't here. I close my eyes for a moment.

Olivia's voice startles me awake. "One-Seven-Nine?"

"Sorry. I drifted off. Were you able to find the prop house that sourced *Mad Men*?"

"Yes. It's the only reason I was able to find as much as I have."

"Okay. Mark up the list and send it to me. I'll figure out something."

"Right. Before you ask, I've no news on the museum man, and we still don't have the aircraft."

"Great." We're both quiet. Finally I say, "Have you slept?"

“Explain to me this concept of ‘sleep.’ It confuses me.”

“Olivia... will you marry me?”

I hear a tiny hint of a chuckle. “Ask again when we’re rested. Back to work, both of us.”



Hoskins’ office needs books. I have about fourteen boxes worth of architecture, art and design books at home. I’m busy dragging them to my rental car when Chloe pulls in.

Chloe’s an assistant at a Robertson Boulevard gallery I didn’t destroy when I was squealing my way out of decades in prison. She’s slender, pale, blond, delicately pretty, and the very nicest person I’ve ever met. She took me in so I wouldn’t be homeless after I got out of PEN. For that, I’ll love her forever. Unfortunately (or maybe fortunately) for us both, she likes girls, so I’ll never be more than her surrogate big brother or best straight male friend.

She stops in the driveway when she sees me carrying a box toward my rental car’s open trunk. Her jaw drops. “What are you *doing*? You’re not moving out, are you?”

The pain in her voice makes me thump down the box and hurry to her. “No, no, no. Hey, don’t worry.”

I tell her my story—set decoration, indie movie, some good money—while she stands there in her little black dress, looking like I just whipped a kitten in front of her. I hate, hate, *hate* lying to her, but I have to. Chloe’s great, but she makes Julian Assange look like a mute. Like my probation officer, she has no idea what I really do when I’m not slinging coffee.

She finally says, “So *that’s* where you’ve been. I was *worried*. You haven’t been coming home.”

“Sorry. I’m so tired at the end of the day, I’ve been staying there.” Finally, no lie.

“Okay.” She chews on her upper lip. “You scared me. I thought I was losing you.”

Someday this will be her leaving because she’s found a nice girl to settle down with. Now I know what that’ll be like. “Sorry.” I pull her into a hug. It’s like holding a big bird. She’s small enough that she can nestle her head under the angle of my jaw.

She pulls back after a while, not as gloomy as before. “Can I

come see?”

“Let me ask. It’s kind of a mess right now. Maybe after the shoot.”

I’ve lied to a lot of people throughout my life. I’m not proud of it, but I’ve done it. It’s only when I have to lie to the people closest to me that I wonder what I’ve become.



Tuesday. The schedule says I’m supposed to move in today. I already pretty much moved in a while ago. The brand-new washer’s churning a load of clothes I’ve worn over the past week.

I didn’t sleep. I wrangled the night crew, shelved books in Hoskins’ office, knocked almost thirty things off the punch list, hung a couple paintings, installed a lock on the office door, and started propping the house. Bedroom four is stuffed with bags and boxes that arrived until ten last night, dropped by five different prop houses, FedEx, UPS, a couple TaskRabbit people, and Gelson’s grocery delivery. I’m in great shape to be an extra on *The Walking Dead*.

But... I make myself a latte on the brand-new Miele coffeemaker sitting on the brand-new granite countertop in Hoskins’ brand-new kitchen. It tastes incredible. As I stand on the patio next to the pool—now full, slowly warming up—it feels like I might actually pull this off.

I’d better.

Savannah arrives in twenty-four hours.