

## The Case of the Ancient Bleached Reef

### Chapter One

I am an unemployed Marine Corp veteran and I want to stay in San Diego. That is asking a lot with the cost of living in Southern California. My plan is to get a job with one of the many defense related companies that employ people like myself. My savings are meager at present. After my Friday morning appointment with Dr. Savage, a doctor in the rehabilitation unit at Balboa Hospital, he gives me a lead on a possible living arrangement. Since I'm being discharged from the hospital soon, I jump on it. It's downtown and in an older apartment building from the description. There has to be a catch.

"Fred, let me be frank with you, it's a unique living arrangement..." the doctor tells me as I sit in his office. I immediately jump to the conclusion that it is some sort of weird sexual situation not that I wouldn't be receptive under the right circumstances. The doctor continues, "It's nothing sexual. Your roommate has a unique personality, not in a violent way or anything. She is a very intelligent and focused person. Just go check it out. I will send a text that you're stopping by." He hands me a yellow post it note with an address on Ash street in downtown and the amount of rent I would pay. I took one look at the amount and even if it's a walk in closet, it's rent I can afford. I figure the doctor is trying to kill two birds with one stone in spite of his Hippocratic Oath to do no harm. Perhaps his oath doesn't apply to birds. Veterinarians also have an oath but it's not as avuncular.

What did I have to lose except the cost of an Uber ride? With a few clicks on my phone, I'm all set to go apartment hunting.

I grab my cane, a polished black stick with a golden eagle for a handle. I rise from my chair, my knee is a little stiff but it's infinitely more functional than when I entered this hospital months ago. I let out a groan that my grandpa would be proud of as I rose out of the chair. Perhaps I could stand to lose a bit of weight but everyone thinks that. I only weigh two hundred pounds. I was one hundred seventy pounds when I entered the hospital. As I leave, I can't help but sense a hint of disapproval from my doctor as he shakes his head as I limp out his office door. I'm breathing a little heavy as I reach the elevator. I guess I could stand to lose a few pounds.

I exit the building and I flag down my car at the curb. Not my car but the ride share car I ordered. The driver smiles as she verifies me and I open the car door and step in. A few minutes later I'm at my destination. A large white apartment building that must have been built back in the 1920s. It's shaped like a giant wedding cake. It's built in the Spanish Baroque Style

and has many decorative carvings and window details. There appears to be a significant amount of renovation. I walk into the lobby. There are no signs saying hardhats required so I take the elevator up to the 10<sup>th</sup> floor. As I look at the post it note, I notice there is no apartment number. The elevator door opens as I wonder to myself, how will I find the correct apartment? As I step out, I need not have worried.

Most of the walls are knocked down except for the load bearing ones. I hope. I look around and then I hear a voice. "Hello there. You should not be on this floor unless your name is Fred Sutherland." A slim woman strides toward me, I'm guessing in her thirties. She is wearing running shoes, tweed pants and buttoning up a red blouse. Her brown hair is wet and pulled back into a ponytail. Her clothes are dry.

"Hello," I say to her. I'm a little ashamed to admit that I was staring at her. She has a runner's body, lean but not skinny. Her angular face reminded me of the art deco statues I had seen in New York City. Her cheekbones sharp and her mouth set in a petulant expression. She has bright eyes that one moment peer into my face then dart away. There is something peculiar in her stare. I think she's attractive but I have also been in a hospital for a few months. "My name is Fred Sutherland."

"I'm in my thirties," she tells me. "I weigh 120 pounds and five foot seven. I do not have a boyfriend or girlfriend. I am not currently sexually active."

"Okay. Thanks for that information," I reply. I was under the impression there was no sexual component to this roommate arrangement. Although, I can always be convinced otherwise I think to myself.

"That was a statement of fact."

"How did you know that was what I was thinking?" I ask.

"You're 31 years old, healthy male and heterosexual. That is what males your age think about when they meet an unfamiliar female."

"Huh. Now that I think about it, you're right." I say as I change the subject. "I guess you received the text from Doctor Savage?" I say to her.

"I received the text. And it's unavailable by the way."

"Excuse me?" I think this has been a waste of time to check out this apartment or whatever the living arrangements this is.

“Sex. With me. That is unavailable. The roommate arrangement is available,” she replies.

“Okay. Great. But, I have to ask...”

“Why is my hair wet? I was conducting an experiment when you arrived.”

“That answers one question. But I was going to ask about the apartment.”

“And you have other questions.”

“So many and I just met you. And hang on, how did you know I was 31?” I briefly consider that Dr. Savage told her. So much for HIPAA.

“Sara Slocum,” she replies. Apparently, we are doing introductions now so I set my cane against a crate and stick my hand out to shake her hand. She takes a deep breath, looks at my outstretched hand and says, “I’m not in the habit of sharing protein strands or other nasty little organisms that might be crawling on your skin,” and refuses to shake my hand.

I’m at a loss for words on how to respond.

“Google, Facebook.” she says.

“Pardon me?”

“Rather frightening how much information you can glean from people's social media.

“Okay, “I reply warily. I think to myself, I should have looked her up.

Before I can continue our conversation, she turns on her heel and walks back toward a part of the floor that still has walls and which I assume is the actual apartments and the room I may or may not be renting. As we scramble about, walking through white wallboard dust on the floor, kicking aside small sections of aluminum ducting and stepping over electrical wiring, we arrive at an oak door. An ornately carved door that is out of place in most apartment buildings in my adult experience. I remember expensive furnishings from my youth but that was my parent’s lifestyle and not mine.

Slocum turns the brass lever on the door and it opens into a large room. It’s a study that would be more at home in an English manor house. The walls are white drywall, one wall has a large flat panel screen with an overstuffed chair in front of it. To the right of that, are large French doors that open to a balcony with a west facing view of the ocean. The wall with the front door has a massive wooden desk that would be at home in the Oval Office with two laptops, an electronic tablet and several open books sprawled on the top. On the right is a wall lined with shelves

stuffed with books. A hallway leading to bedrooms. On our left is a swinging door that I assume leads to a kitchen.

“There is plenty of room on this floor. I have a lab setup with computer equipment that given your background, I can say with full confidence you will find quite impressive,” she says. “And you will have full use of it. You are free to indulge yourself in gaming or other peccadillos that you do online. As long as it doesn’t interfere with your work here.”

“I came looking for a place to live. Not a construction worker or butler or whatever’s going on here,” I tell her. I pull out the post it note and show it to her.

“That’s the rent I’m charging and quite a deal I must say. I was under the impression you were also looking for employment?”

“Well, yes but I was thinking Qualcomm or something like that.”

“I’m sure you would be lovely at that sort of job. With your Computer Science degree. Dr. Savage tells me you redesigned the hospital’s entire network, increased security and real time patient data. While you were a patient no less.” She grabs the post it note from me and whips from her pocket what is a very expensive fountain pen and jots down a number. “I’m a confidential security consultant and someone with your expertise is a must have these days what with computers, smart phones, artificial intelligence, and the machines poised to take over human kind. So, do you think any company will start you off at that number?”

I take the post it note, glance at it and I can feel my jaw drop. “I’m not sure about all this...” I say. Perhaps she is some sort of cybercriminal or has some other shady operation in mind.

“Nothing illegal. Quite the contrary. I think you’re interested. The cheap apartment. The strange woman offering you a generous salary. The mystery of it all. Otherwise, you would have left already. All those months loitering in the hospital, I think you’re due a little change of pace don’t you think?”

Before I can reply, a foghorn sound fills the room. “Excuse me. Work text.” She pulls a phone out of her hip pocket. She glances at it then her thumbs fly as she replies. Holding the phone in her left hand, she walks to the door. She grabs a bag, not a purse; more of a backpack. She also puts a floppy Panama hat on her head. I should have a hat. June in San Diego is either “June Gloom” with overcast skies or like today: blazing sun.

“You coming?” She says to me. “This is an opportunity to learn what the job entails. Consider it your interview.”

I stand there. Frozen in indecision. Something I never used to do. Something that I hate.

“Come on, man. You were in the Army or Navy or something.”

“Marines,” I tell her.

“Well then?” She says as if she knew what my response would be. She holds open the door.

“Alright. What do you want me to do?” I follow her back to the elevator. She jabs the button.

“First, first find us a ride on whatever ride sharing app you use,” she tells me as the elevator doors open.

We step into the elevator as I tap away on my phone. As the doors close, I ask, “Hey! Wait a minute, am I paying for this car?”

## Chapter Two

Early that afternoon, we took a ride out to the address Slocum gave me. During the twenty minute ride on Interstate 5 to La Jolla, Slocum explains that she received a referral for a missing person case. A missing person case involving the Turners. I use the ride to look up information on the Turners. The family patriarch, Jack Turner made millions in real estate, defense contracts and even owned a movie studio for a time. In other words, the family is loaded. Jack Turner dated movie starlets, got in a few bar brawls in his younger years and married and divorced three times. Before Jack Turner died, he established a charitable foundation as most people that wealthy often do to distribute some of his fortune to the less fortunate. His eldest daughter Karen Turner is the president and manages the foundation. The family keeps a relatively low profile now. In other words, they don't have a reality show and the paparazzi pretty much leave them alone.

The driver takes the La Jolla drive exit. It's the middle of the day, during a weekday so traffic is light. People are at work and the tourists are already at the beach. I confess that being thrust into a missing person case is exciting. Slocum sits in the seat beside me. Her face set in concentration, staring straight ahead, her head remains still as her eyes go back and forth as if she is reading text in front of her. It's then that I realize she has one eye that is blue and the other is green. We arrive at a well maintained two story office building overlooking the ocean. A large man in his forties and dressed in a suit and tie, sunglasses and earpiece comes out to escort us into the building. As I step out of the car, I realize I left my cane back in the apartment building. It's not so much that I need it to walk but I paid a lot of money for that cane.

A woman meets us in the lobby. “Hello. I’m Adele Marcos. I texted you about Ms. Turner. I’m her executive assistant. I’m worried about her. She always keeps me informed of her plans and whereabouts.”

“I’m Slocum and this is my associate Sutherland.”

“Thank you for coming. The police said they could do nothing yet and when she didn't arrive at the office or text me...”

As she is still talking, Adele Marcos rushes us up a curving stairway to the second floor. We walk past the reception area and into a large office with the name plate, “Karen Turner President” on the door. We step in and a woman is sitting behind the desk rummaging among some papers on the desk. She notices us and casually tosses the papers back on the desk and rises from her chair.

“I think it might be premature to consider my sister missing. But Adele is insistent. So thank you for coming. Adele informs me you work with the police in some capacity,” a petite woman with blond hair and in a grey suit greets us. “I’m Jane Turner, Karens’s sister,” she extends her hand. Slocum nods to her. In the awkward pause, I shake her hand.

“I’m Fred Sutherland, Ms. Slocum’s, umm, associate.” Slocum glances over at me with a slight smile. Apparently, shaking people’s hands is in my job description.

“Ms. Turner and Ms. Marcos,” Slocum begins. “According to the text I received from Detective Tracey, your sister has been missing approximately six hours. Is that correct?”

“Yes,” Adele Marcos replies.

“That’s not very long. Is there some reason you're concerned? You suspect kidnapping perhaps?”

“Not really. The family foundation has extensive assets so it's possible I suppose,” Jane Turner replies.

“Well, people take a day off or get sick,” I offer.

“You don’t know Ms. Turner. If she’s sick, she works from home and she plans vacations around work at the foundation,” Adele says.

“What Miss Marco's means is that my sister is dedicated. My sister is a creature of habit. This foundation is her passion. Our parents established it when I was still in school. When our dad passed away, it made sense for my older sister to head the foundation. She is one of the most

organized people I know. As a matter of fact, she has a paper backup to her calendar. Maybe she jotted something down and didn't tell Adele or put it in her calendar?"

"The paper copy is in my office, Ms. Turner," Adele replies. "We can double check it."

"Good. Let's get it. 'I'll walk with you. We can chat,'" Jane Turner says to Adele Marcos. They walk out of the office. As they exit, it looks to me like Jane Turner is reading Adele the riot act about something.

"You must earn quite a living handholding rich people."

"Sometimes when the wealthy make a nuisance of themselves to the authorities, the police refer them to me," Slocum says.

"I'm not judging. I'm onboard with it."

"Do you think you can access their network here if we need to?" Slocum says.

I take a peek at my phone, the wifi hotspot antenna installed over the door and then a quick peek at the computer on the desk, "You mean hack into it? What do you have in mind?"

"Nothing at present. Just curious about your expertise. I think the case is a dead end. Her assistant is merely overreacting but we shall humor her and the family for the present."

Jane Turner and Adele Marcos return to the office. Jane Turner is holding the paper calendar and Adele has her electronic tablet.

"Why don't we sit down?" Jane Turner says.

We all take a seat around a large mahogany conference table. There is a very expensive laptop and three tablets on Karen Turner's desk. She didn't take her laptop with her. I plan to mention that to Slocum. I jot that note down in my phone.

"Adele, can you review Karen's schedule for today for Ms. Slocum and Mr. Sutherland? Any discrepancies between the paper calendar?"

Adele looks at her tablet, taps it. "No changes. Wakes at 500AM. Dresses and breakfast by 600AM. Hike 700 - 1100AM. Then to the office, change. Working lunch at 1200PM. Video conference with Hawaii at 300PM. Meet with San Diego mayor at 500PM, downtown. Then dinner at the Paisleys, remember to bring wine. Home by ten. That was today's schedule. I've postponed all her appointments for the day."

“Who are the Paisleys?” Slocum asks.

“Contributors to the foundation. Old friends of Jack Turner. They wanted to endow the foundation but had some questions about how the money...” Adele Marcos is interrupted by Jane Turner.

“No need to get into foundation business, Adele.” Jane Turner tells her.

Slocum pauses as if to ask some follow up questions and says, “well, perhaps we can circle back if we need to.”

“I doubt we will need to,” Jane Turner says.

“Her schedule is day to day, week to week,” Slocum asks. “Does she usually hike by herself?” Slocum asks.

“Sometimes. She usually hikes with friends or her husband. Occasionally by herself. Sometimes she has where she is going hiking, sometimes not. She always texts me where she decides to hike.”

“What about her husband's schedule?”

“I don’t track that. I’ve offered but he declined. I suppose he is sort of private about his comings and goings,” Adele says.

“Have you tried her phone.”

“Adele has, constantly. No answer, goes to voicemail, doesn't answer texts,” Jane says as Adele nods.

“So they both could be together. Does she drive herself?” Slocum asks.

“Yes or her husband.”

“They are both avid outdoor enthusiasts, that's how they met. Almost three years ago,” Jane says.

Slocum taps on her smart phone and says to Jane Turner and Adele Marcos, “is this a current photo of her?”



“Yes. We look like we could be twins but my older sister is an amazing athlete. And she is an experienced hiker and outdoors person. She knows how to take care of herself.” The photo shows healthy looking, blond women.

“Did you try the husband's phone?” Slocum says.

“Yes. Same result,” Adele says.

“Perhaps they are together. They may simply be lost or delayed,” I offer.

“Ms. Turner always lets me know when she is hiking. For safety,” Adele replies. “I received no text, email or call from her or Mr. Wildabank. I’ve been trying both of them since 900AM.”

“Mr. Wildabank is her husband,” Adele Marcos says.

“Second husband,” Jane Turner adds. “I think Adele is overreacting a bit.”

“Perhaps. Regardless, your sister will have my full attention,” Slocum says as she rises to leave. “We will look into this immediately.”

As we get to the office door, Adele Marcos phone buzzes. She whips it up and reads the text, “It's Mr. Wildabank. He is downstairs. He says he just returned from hiking, by himself. He is just arriving outside.”

“Excuse me a moment. I’ll go greet him,” Jane Turner says

I notice that Adele Marcos shakes her head as Jane Turner rushes out the door.

“Is there something wrong?” I ask with a concerned look.

“No. Not at all,” Adele Marcos replies, the sour look still on her face. I look over at Slocum. She doesn't seem to be paying attention. Slocum looks rather bored.

Waiting in the office, we see Jane and a man come up the stairs. He is about the same age as myself. He is about my height but slimmer with dark hair. He has a square jaw and blue eyes. He is one of those people that have that Hollywood leading man look. He is dressed in dusty hiking boots, grey pants that have zippers at the knee and a damp tee shirt. Jane and the man walk close together, the man’s arm is draped over her shoulder as they approach the office. She doesn't seem to mind his sweaty arm. They whisper to each other and nod. I can hear Jane say don’t worry, “it's not your fault,” as they enter the office.

Chuck Wildabank takes his arm from around Jane Turner. He stops in the doorway. "I got a text from Adele and came directly here. Who are these people?" He asks, referring to Slocum and myself.

"Adele was concerned about Karen," Jane Turner says. "They work with the police."

"The police? Karen didn't come to work?" He asks.

"No," Adele Marcos says. "Weren't you hiking with her this morning?"

"She didn't want to do El Cap. I was in a hurry to get to the summit before it got too hot. So I went by myself and I left her at home. I put my phone on airplane mode to go hiking."

"We haven't heard from her." Adele Marcos says.

"You went hiking up El Cajon Mountain. Is that correct?" Slocum asks him.

"Yes. Who are you?" He asks Slocum.

Slocum looks at him in a curious way, like I would if I met someone with two heads. The bored expression disappears from Slocum's face and she stares at Wildabank, looking him up and down like a tiger eyeing its next meal. To my surprise, Slocum walks over and grabs his hand with both of her hands. Her grip lingers on his hand. "Sara Slocum. Don't worry. We will find your wife."

"Thank you. I'm sure everything's all right," he replies, looking warily at her.

"Did she tell you her plans?" Slocum asks.

"No. I didn't ask her. I should have. We planned to go on a longer hike today and I was a little peeved that she didn't want to do El Cap. You think something happened to her?" Chuck Wildabank says as he rubs his face with his hands.

"I'm sure she is fine," Slocum says. To my further surprise, she embraces Chuck Wildabank for a moment, rubs his shoulder with her right hand and then leads him to a chair and sits down beside him. He sits and crosses his legs as does Slocum and moves little closer to him. His boot is nearly touching her shoes. Slocum reaches out and taps his boot with the fingertips of her left hand.

"Do you know where she went?" Slocum asks him.

“No. I don’t. As I said, she didn’t tell me. She is probably doing a hike somewhere. Maybe she decided to go for a run instead.”

“Of course, of course but then wouldn’t she leave her phone on?” Slocum says. She takes her gaze from Chuck Wildanbank and looks around at everyone in the room..

“Yeah,” Chuck Wildanbank replies.

Slocum jumps up and says, “Could you all give my associate and myself the room so we can confer?” Slocum says. “And her cell number and carrier?”

“Uh, sure,” Adele Marcos writes it down on a dry erase board on the wall.

“Let’s step out for...how long?” Jane Turner says.

“Fifteen minutes. Please. Mr. Sutherland and I need to discuss the way ahead.”

They exit the office and close the door.

“What do we need to discuss?” I ask Slocum.

“Make sure the door is closed. Do you think you can access Karen Turner’s account, her personal one?” Slocum says to me. “And perhaps track her cell phone activity?”

“Maybe. If you give me her number. But it is not strictly legal.”

“Actually, it’s very illegal. Time is a factor here. If my suspicions are correct.”

Slocum walks over to the printer and extracts a blank piece of paper. She places the paper on the conference table. She rubs her right fingers over the paper then does the same thing with her left fingers. Some dust settles on the paper and a long strand of red hair. Taking her bag from her shoulder she pulls out her phone and attaches a lens over the camera aperture and points her camera at the bits on the piece of paper. It is a magnifying camera lens. She snaps pictures and then looks at the images on her phone. She hunches over the table for some minutes then stands straight up. I see a look of concentration.

As I stand guard at the door, I take out my phone and open the browser and tap on a website for Karen Turner’s cell phone carrier. It doesn’t take long to get into her account “I’m in. What are we looking for?”

“What is her cell activity this morning?”

“Yes. She started off from a neighborhood in La Jolla, I assume their house. Her phone was shut off this morning at 8:04AM on Interstate 8 near the Borrego Springs exit.”

“Are you certain?” Slocum asks.

“Yes. How much trouble am I in for this?” I say.

“None. If I'm correct.”

I walk over to Slocum at the conference table and look at the paper in front of her. I see some dust and red hair. She has her phone out and her thumbs fly over the keypad.

“Who are you texting?” I ask.

“Detective Tracey,” she replies. “Sutherland, we have done all we can here. Let us bid our clients a good day.”

### Chapter Three

The next morning, I brought a copy of the Union Tribune newspaper to my soon to be shared quarters with Slocum as I was in the midst of moving in my belongings. I have the electronic edition of the newspaper but I'm old school when it comes to the newspaper.

The door to our apartment is unlocked. We have the entire floor to ourselves during the renovation. Slocum told me that eventually there will be a key code on the elevator to access this top floor of the building but until that time except for construction crew and the building staff, there is no one in the building. Where there was only one chair yesterday, there are now two. I found her in one of the stuffed leather chairs facing a large flat screen on the wall. I consider asking how she can afford to live here but then decide it's none of my business. I'm not the detective, I'm the IT guy. She gestured for me to come sit beside her. There were two coffee cups on the small circular wood table separating our chairs.

“Good morning, Slocum. Here is the paper. Now will you explain the whole matter from yesterday?” I had the generalities and a few more details from today's paper but I knew Slocum had the whole story. I had cajoled her repeatedly yesterday to explain but Slocum was texting or on a voice call intermittently. Then at police headquarters for the remainder of the day to which I was not invited.

“Of course. Sit and I will fill in some of the details I'm certain were missing from today's edition.”

I plop down in the other chair and sip the still hot coffee, French Vanilla if I'm not mistaken. “So how did you know that he did it?”

“If he hadn't come to their offices I would not have known or at least not in time,” she tells me. “At first blush, this case appeared to be family overreacting to a member being late to work or at most a husband and wife lost or injured on some backwoods trail. More a case for search and rescue. Then the husband shows up and tells us lies.”

“Lies?”

“Yes. Mr. Chuck Wildabank claimed to have hiked El Cajon Mountain or El Cap and conveniently had his phone off. There is intermittent coverage. I'll grant that and provide an excuse for his phone to be turned off. The trail closes down or at least discouraged at the end of May due to heat. So there are not many people there.”

“Yes. His phone records show us he was there. But why did you suspect him to begin with?” I say.

“True but that doesn't mean that was the hike he took. His hands and his boots told a different story.”

“I remember he was dressed in outdoor clothes and boots. He appeared to have been hiking. He was sweaty and dusty.”

“True but what kind of dust? The terrain of El Cajon or El Cap is composed of granite and metamorphic rock that is dark and harder but the dust on his boots was lighter and softer. A material more akin to the remains of a bleached reef from an ancient seabed. And where do we have an exposed ancient seabed?”

I pretend to sip my coffee until Slocum continues.

“The Anza Borrego desert.. That narrowed down where he had actually been. Not just any sandy dust but with a hint of another soft but darker soil found in one particular place. An area called the Mud Caves. He eventually confessed that he had staged an accident for his wife there. I don't think he really planned a premeditated murder but either he or his accomplice were clever. He said he had an argument with his wife that turned physical. He pushed her. She fell. She struck her head and it rendered her unconscious.”

“If it was an accident, why not call for an ambulance?”

“They argued about the affair he is having. She threatened to divorce him. Their prenuptial agreement would leave him with nothing.”

“I see. Then the accomplice was the other woman?”

“Correct. They dressed Karen Turner in outdoor clothing. He had time to drive out to the Mud Caves and his accomplice followed in another SUV. The terrain is flowing sand and dry so identifying tire tracks out there is next to impossible. There are not many people out in the desert at night. He was familiar with the area and had no problem finding it at night.”

“Why did you grab his hands?”

“To check his pulse. His pulse was racing as well. That was out of place for someone in such good shape. And if he was not worried about his wife then why was his heart beating at such a high rate?”

“What about the hug?”

“That? I thought I spied a long hair on his shoulder. It had to be recent since he was outside and claimed to have not met or seen anyone on his hike. It wasn't a blond hair like his wife or Jane Turner. It turned out to be a red hair.”

“His girlfriend?”

“His paramour and accomplice as it turns out,” Slocum tells me. “It wasn't difficult to find her after a court order to see his cell phone records.”

“His girlfriend was the one driving around with the cell phone the time of morning that Karen Turner was supposed to be hiking?”

“Exactly.”

Why didn't he just send a text from his wife's phone to her assistant about a change of plans? That would have been a better alibi.”

“He didn't know the passcode on his wife's phone. They could establish that she went somewhere out that way to hike, shut off her phone and be vague on the location,” Slocum says.

“I see. If I was married, I guess I wouldn't want my wife to have my passcode or password to my computer or browser history, either,” I reply.

“Hence, we know why you are not married. And this takes us down a path that I don't think either of us wants to pursue,” Slocum says.

“Absolutely, so back to the phone records.”

“Turning the phone off would give the husband an alibi of a sort,” Slocum says. “But that also convinced me that the husband was involved in her disappearance. He turned his phone off very early that morning because he didn't want to be tracked going to the Mud Caves. Then back on and then off at El Cap to give himself an alibi. He drove his SUV while his accomplice drove his wife's car. If his wife was in the habit of putting her cell phone on airplane mode when they leave their house for a hike, then why did his wife just happen to leave hers on until she was on the highway that very morning? If she was in the habit of keeping her assistant informed and had a change of plans why not send a quick text?”

“Good point. He didn't fill his accomplice in on these little nuances,” I say.

“Its details, Sutherland, its details,” Slocum says. “Since it was a Friday, he assumed Karen Turner was taking the day off to go hiking, he didn't know that she had meetings that day. Only a dinner scheduled. If he had shared his calendar, he might have known. Hiking anywhere in Anza Borrego is an all day activity.”

“How did you get him to confess?”

“When Mr. Wildabank realized the police were searching the Mud Caves, he asked for a lawyer. His lawyer advised cooperation. Mr. Chuck Wildabank confessed to everything. Hoping for leniency I suppose. He and the red haired woman devised a plan to stage an accident in the Mud Caves as if she had struck her head and then rendered unconscious while out on an early morning hike. Then park his wife's car on a side trail, with the weather turning hot out in the desert, no one would find her for a few days.”

“But she was alive,” I say.

“Mr. Wildabank and his paramour thought it would take longer to find her. Another hour more and she would have been dead.”

“Why didn't they...”

“Just finish her off? I don't think they were that far gone as to be cold blooded murderers. Perhaps they couldn't take that last step into the abyss. Who knows.”

“Why call his girlfriend? She might have turned him in.”

“I don't think so. I think all the cleverness in this escapade originates with his mistress. I believe the girlfriend had some sort of scheme to get at the family money. I think the violent fight waylaid her plans. This coverup was a hasty plan of last resort. Wildabank is thoroughly under the influence of this red haired woman. She wasn't involved in the assault but I think she did plan the coverup. I also think she will be successful in laying it all at Mr. Chuck Wildabanks doorstep. And deservedly so. What of Karen Turner? Her doctors are optimistic about a full recovery.”

“I don't know if anyone fully recovers from such an ordeal,” I reply as Slocum turns away from me and takes the Sports section of the newspaper.