


STEVEN GORE

Author of *Absolute Risk* and *Final Target*



"A TALENTED WRITER
WHO KNOWS HOW TO
HOOK HIS READERS FROM
THE OPENING LINE."

Richard North Patterson

ACT OF DECEIT

A HARLAN DONNALLY NOVEL



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HARPER

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Dedication

For Seth Norman, breaker of currents

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Chapter 1

Harlan Donnally gazed down at the weathered Hispanic face framed by the white pillowcase, then reached out and gripped the little man's shoulder. Withered skin and fragile bone met his hand, a body thinned first by the creeping starvation of failed chemotherapy and now by the pneumonia that would kill him.

This wasn't the first time that Donnally had found himself standing at the precipice of death. Not only had he watched others die, but a decade earlier he'd looked up from a San Francisco sidewalk at paramedics fighting his descent into the void that would soon claim Mauricio Aguilera.

Despite the name on the signs he'd followed through the Northern California hospital, in Donnally's mind it wasn't really a hospice, a way station, for the man lying in the bed was neither a stranger in Mount Shasta nor passing through on a pilgrimage.

In truth, it was a dying room, a place of endings, not of passages, and of final conversations for those with the courage to have them.

Donnally had seen enough of death to know that for most visitors the rooms along the hallway were nothing more than temples of silent pretense, their fluorescent lights falling on pairs of cowboy boots shifting on linoleum, on wordless men in church shirts and pressed Levi's, on fidgeting hands of scrubbed children, and on women fretting over untucked sheets and unfluffed pillows.

But only one set of boots occupied the sand-colored floor of Mauricio's room.

"You got better things to do," Mauricio said in a whisper, looking up at Donnally, his thinning black hair matted against his head, his face lined like a parched desert lake. He coughed and wiped his mouth. "Than watch a man die."

Donnally pulled over a chair. He clenched his jaw as he sat down, anticipating the bite in his hip joint, trying not to let his face show the pain. It was a move he'd practiced for months during his rehab, hoping to deceive the San Francisco Police Department doctors who'd been determined to retire him out on disability.

But the move hadn't worked then, and didn't work now.

Mauricio glanced toward Donnally's hip. "Why don't you just get a new one?" He

licked his lips and swallowed hard. “I heard the nurse talking about her father . . . titanium.” He struggled to smile. “Like a golf club. He can square dance again . . .” He raised his eyebrows. “And everything.”

Donnally shrugged. “I’m used to it.”

Mauricio stared up at the ceiling fixture set into the sound-muting tiles, and then said, “You’ve got to let go of the past, Harlan.”

Donnally knew Mauricio wasn’t talking only about the Mission District shootout that had ended his career ten years earlier, for there always had been a duality in their conversations, one that sometimes left Donnally stranded in the shadowed gap between Mauricio’s words and his thoughts.

“Give me a good reason,” Donnally said.

“I’ll tell you what I figured out lying here all these weeks. If you’re going to be dead to the present, you might as well not be alive at all.”

Donnally slipped his .32 semiautomatic from the pocket of his jeans and extended it butt-first toward Mauricio.

“You want to shoot me and get it over with?” Donnally asked.

Mauricio waved it off. “Been there. Done that.”

Donnally lowered the gun and squinted at Mauricio, trying to detect a killer behind the mask of the gentle man who fed stray dogs, freed kitchen spiders into his backyard, and gave shelter to the homeless passing through town.

“You what?” Donnally asked.

In a decade of running their businesses side by side, Donnally figured he’d heard all of Mauricio’s stories. Knew each step in his migration from Guadalajara to Tijuana, to the pima cotton fields in Southern Arizona, to the California Central Valley, and then to Sacramento. Attending adult school at night, and then community college, working toward the American Dream. And finally moving north to Mount Shasta after he’d saved enough money to open his own business: an unnamed fix-it shop and junkyard next to Donnally’s Lone Mountain Café.

Mauricio blinked, but didn’t respond. Donnally figured he was trying to decide what version of his past to tell, for he’d never told the same tale twice, or at least the same one twice in the same way.

Perched at Donnally’s counter before daybreak, sipping black coffee, looking out through scratched eyeglasses, he’d talk about when he first met César Chávez outside the Gallo vineyard in Modesto—

Or was it during the pesticide protest in Delano?

Or maybe at the grape boycott march to the capitol?

For the first few months after Donnally moved up from San Francisco and bought the café, he’d look over at Mauricio and wonder what he was hiding. Back then, when Donnally was still steered by a detective’s habit of mind, he plumbed for the big truth beneath the little lies. In the end, he came to view Mauricio less as fact than fiction, as a poet of his own life, sometimes just following his words to their own destination, with truth somehow nestled in the sounds and rhythms.

Listening to Mauricio day after day, watching him nurse his coffee, Donnally often wondered whether there was any real difference between Mauricio’s poetic recreations of his past and his own father’s evasions and self-deceptions—except for the rage it generated in him.

Donnally slipped the gun back into his pocket.

“What do you mean?” Donnally asked. “Been there, done that. You shot somebody?”

Mauricio still didn’t answer. He just stared vacant-eyed at the ceiling as though his mind had moved on to something else.

Donnally settled back in his chair. There was no reason to press the issue. Mauricio’s kind of poetry couldn’t be created on demand. And Mauricio knew better than Donnally how much time he had left to compose it.

“A priest came by last night,” Mauricio finally said, his voice stronger. “A young guy. Skinny as a *calaveras*, a skeleton, and pale as fog.” He smiled, then glanced toward the hallway. “Everybody around here thinks all Mexicans are Catholics waiting for the magical words to escort them to the afterlife.” He laid his hand on his chest. “But the truth is that campesinos like me are Indian first and Mexican second, and the Day of the Dead is the only sacrament we need.”

“You talk to him anyway?”

Mauricio shook his head. “I pretended I was asleep. He said some stuff in Latin. I think it made him feel better.”

Donnally peered at Mauricio. “What about you?”

“I didn’t get the sense he was doing it for me. It was more like he was getting extra credit on a take-home assignment.”

That was the one thing he and Mauricio agreed on, but for different reasons. For Mauricio, religion was a straitjacket. For Donnally, it was an unknowable ocean.

“He the only one who’s dropped in?” Donnally asked.

“The third. I feel like one of those guys at the county fair who sits on the little seat above the water and people throw softballs at the target.” He smiled again. “Whichever child of the cloth dunks me wins a teddy bear and a place in heaven.”

The window rattled as a logging truck passing by compression-braked its descent toward the center of town.

Mauricio waited for the clattering to fade, then said, “A Mormon lady dropped in, too. She told me that she’d be coming back to baptize me after I’m dead.”

Donnally’s eyebrows furrowed and he drew back. “Isn’t that a little late? I thought the whole idea was that you needed the right state of mind to go to heaven. Seems to me that if you’re dead you can’t have any state of mind at all.”

Mauricio looked out of the window at the snow-dusted pines surrounding the one-story hospital, then back at Donnally.

“I’m not so sure about that,” Mauricio said. “What do you think? We go somewhere after we die?”

“Sure. In the ground or up in smoke.”

“I mean after that.”

Donnally leaned in toward Mauricio. “You worried about something?”

Mauricio shrugged. “Lying here I came up with an idea about why people need to believe in an afterlife. I don’t know if it makes sense or if it’s just the drugs talking. I’ve been thinking that only bad people need to believe in it. Good people got nothing to be afraid of and nothing to make up for, so oblivion is fine with them.”

Mauricio picked up a plastic cup from the over-bed table and took a sip of water. Donnally pulled a tissue from a Kleenex box and wiped away a drop that slipped by

Mauricio's mouth.

"There's something in there for you to read," Mauricio said, setting down the cup and tilting his head toward the side table.

Donnally reached toward the drawer, but Mauricio raised his palm, stopping him. "Afterwards. Everything is just like we talked about." He then looked toward the open door. "Except one thing."

Chapter 2

Harlan Donnally stared down at the headstone. It read “Mauricio Quintero,” not “Mauricio Aguilera.”

It bore no epitaph, nor age, nor dates of birth or death, for as Donnally now understood, any further inscription would’ve just compounded the lie that had been Mauricio’s existence.

Right at the end, just before he died, Mauricio had said his true name was all he wanted on the marker. The only part of the Bible he’d acknowledged he believed in was the phrase “for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return,” and he didn’t think there was any reason for people to come honor the fiction he’d created out of his life.

Donnally stood on the snow-covered ground next to the gravesite as the backhoe pushed the mound of dark soil over the coffin. In those few minutes, the mist slid in, bleaching out the brown and green of the pines and turning the red dirt gray. Only the granite headstones standing around him like lost souls seemed impervious to the whims of light and fog.

After watching the rusty John Deere grind its way back to the equipment barn, Donnally took a final look at the etched name, then walked over to his truck and climbed in. Lying on the passenger seat was Mauricio’s last will, and the confession he had denied the priest.

January 23

Dear Harlan:

My real name is Mauricio Quintero.

On March 14, 1965, I shot and killed my father.

I came home from school and caught him molesting my sister in a migrant shack where we lived outside of Livingston in the Central Valley. I was fifteen. She was five.

I don’t think she understood what he was doing to her. Maybe she just thought it was a weird game. Eventually she would’ve figured it out, because he wasn’t going to stop.

It was up to me to put an end to it, and that meant putting an end to him. There was no one else because my mother had died giving birth to her.

The news article about my crime is in my safety deposit box at the Valley Bank. It’s only a couple of lines.

Mexicans didn't count for much back then.

My sister's name is Anna. I don't know what her last name is now.

I didn't know what to do, so I took her up to Berkeley one night and left her on the doorstep of New Sky, one of the communes they had there back then. (The address is in the box, too.) I hoped they'd do the right thing, but not call the police.

I went back there in 1974 and waited around the high school for a couple of days until I saw her walking toward the bus stop with some girls. I didn't try to talk to her and I never went back. She didn't need the burden of being the sister of a boy who killed his father. It would've cast a shadow over her whole life. It's one of those crimes that's like a genetic disease, only one that kills the spirit.

And I didn't want to lie to her. I thought that would've been even worse.

But lying here the last few weeks made me think differently. I figured out that everybody needs to be from somewhere, otherwise you're just kind of floating. Even though you hate where you come from, Harlan, at least you know where that is.

I realize now that I should've started thinking about death a lot sooner, but I guess I did too much pretending all my life. You're different. You stopped pretending about things when your brother got killed in the war. I hope you didn't stop forgiving back then, too, because I need some forgiveness now.

I didn't tell you before because you'd have turned me in. You wouldn't have wanted to, but you would've because there isn't a statute of limitations for what I did. I know that there are just certain things we have to do in order to live with ourselves. I've got mine and you've got yours. And one of yours would've sent me to prison.

I'd like you to find her. Use whatever money you need from selling my place and give the rest to her.

I'm sorry to dump this on you, but I just ran out of time and of life. Or maybe I was a coward all the way along.

If you want, show her this letter so she'll know I was thinking about her at the end.

And take care of Ruby, she's been a good dog to a bad man.

Mauricio

Donnally stared through his windshield at the snow now swirling around the cemetery. All these years he'd thought that Mauricio made up his life because the truth didn't mean anything to him. It was the opposite. The truth meant everything, but he'd just never known what to do with it.

And Donnally didn't know what to do with it either.

Find Anna and do what?

He folded the letter and slipped it into the inside pocket of his parka, then switched on his wipers against the obliterating flurry, the flakes growing larger and wetter and collecting on the mound of cold clay and scraps of dead grass and weeds now piled on top of Mauricio.

Find her and do what?

Donnally found himself gripping the steering wheel. His body telling him that anger was finally emerging from the grief.

Mauricio was right about himself and there was no maybe about it: He was a coward.

You don't leave it to other people to clean up after you. You're supposed to learn that as a child, when your father trips over one of your toys, or when you spill the milk, or when you've got to break up with a girl.

But Mauricio had just shrugged it off.

It was one thing to be the executor of someone's estate. That Donnally had been willing to do. It was another to be the executor of his life.

Anyway, Donnally thought, executors were supposed to follow instructions, not make them up as they went along.

Donnally lowered his hands and turned off the wipers. He poured himself a half cup

of coffee from a thermos. Steam rose in the dead air of the cab, and the headstone disappeared behind the fogging windshield.

That slab of granite might as well not be there at all, Donnally said to himself. *Might as well be a pauper's grave, or a John Doe's, for nobody in Mount Shasta knew who Mauricio really was.*

Mauricio Aguilera had simply been a prism that had refracted away the truth of the who, and the what, and the where of Mauricio Quintero.

And the foundation on which his life had been built lay not in Mount Shasta, but in a Central Valley town that nobody in Siskiyou County had ever heard of or would've cared about if they had, except for Donnally.

The image of Livingston stuck in Donnally's mind like a live moth on flypaper. In the late eighties, as a young officer working the SFPD fugitive detail, he'd driven down the heart of the state through fog yellowed by agricultural burning, breathing in smoke and diesel fumes, hunting for a wino who'd stabbed a postal worker in a skid-row hotel lobby. In morbid irony, the killer, who'd been drunk on the fortified wine marketed to alcoholics that had made the Gallo brothers rich, had sought refuge at the Gallo labor camp.

For years Donnally's memory of Livingston had been anchored in a single image: walking into the shed, finding the killer hanging from a rafter, his neck snapped, his dead body still rocking above an overturned crate. And by a single thought: that the last sounds the man had heard were Donnally's footsteps on the wooden porch and the squeak of the turning doorknob.

Now that memory had broken free and all Donnally saw when he imagined that place was a little girl molested by her father . . . a young Mauricio . . . and a gunshot.

A snowdrift climbed up Donnally's windshield. He took a sip of coffee and wondered what it was about death that got your mind interlocking things, like putting a jigsaw puzzle together without having the picture to tell you what you're aiming for, and not even knowing whether all the pieces came from the same box.

What's the picture supposed to be? he asked himself as he rolled down his window and drained the cup on the ground. *And what am I supposed to say when I find her?*

Hi, Anna, my name is Harlan. Your father molested you as a kid. I thought you should know.

Hi, Anna, my name is Harlan. You used to have a brother. I thought you should know.

Hi, Anna, my name is Harlan. Your brother murdered your father. I thought you should know.

Donnally turned the ignition and flicked on the wipers. He stretched his arm along the top of the bench seat and looked through the rear cab window as he backed up between the pines and the rows of headstones until he reached the dirt road that bisected the cemetery. He then shifted into drive and headed toward Main Street.

Screw him. I ain't nobody's postman.

Chapter 3

Son of a bitch.

The words rushed through Donnally's mind even before he was awake, as though he was providing a voice-over for his own dream.

He saw himself in the mid-1970s standing across the street from Berkeley High School. He was wearing a serape and a soiled cap and holding a short-handled hoe. Hippies were flashing him two-fingered peace signs or raising clenched fists in claimed solidarity with farmworkers striking in the Central Valley.

Cops kept ordering him to move along, but he circled back hour after hour, day after day, until he spotted a Mexican girl walking toward the bus stop.

Son of a bitch.

Even after Donnally rolled over and looked at the glowing digital clock, the image stayed with him. He knew he was awake. No doubt about that. It was just that he was still dreaming.

Now the girl turned toward him and headed down the sidewalk, her hand jittering against the chain-link fence enclosing the basketball courts.

She stopped two feet away and said, "Everybody's got to be from somewhere, Harlan. Where am I from?"

A Buddhist monk in an orange robe walked up to them. Not a Hare Krishna chanting bullshit and beating drums, but a real one. Bald as citrus and skinny as a carrot.

They turned toward him.

Then a clash of cymbals.

Donnally reached for the telephone before he understood it was ringing.

"We're out of half-and-half," his waitress said, not giving him a chance to say hello.

He sat up on the edge of the bed. "Go get some from Mauricio's."

"I'm sure whatever he had is spoiled by now," she said. "Anyway, I don't have a key."

Donnally rubbed his temples to clear his mind.

“Yeah, that’s right.” *Mauricio’s dead*. He looked again at the clock. Five A.M. The Food Mart wasn’t open yet. “I’ve got some in the fridge. I’ll bring it down.”

He lowered the handset back into its cradle, wondering why he’d never before made the mistake of thinking someone was alive after they’d passed away.

Never once had he thought of picking up the phone and calling his grandmother after she died, even though he felt a connection to her that transcended her death. He’d heard about other people doing that, and other things, too. Looking for birthday cards after the birthdays had stopped. Worrying about whether their grandmother would fall and hurt herself. Wondering how white carnations would look on her dining table.

Except Donnally never forgot that his grandmother’s table was out in his garage, disassembled and leaning against the wall, and her chairs were lined up by the café door for people to sit on while waiting for a table to open up.

It was only Mauricio who wouldn’t go away.

He slipped on Levi’s and a parka, retrieved a carton of half-and-half from the refrigerator, and drove it downtown. He parked behind the restaurant and entered through the back door because he wasn’t in the mood to banter with the guys from the Caterpillar dealership, or from the Valley Bank, or from the feed store, or with the retired sheriff who planted himself at the counter each morning as if the red Naugahyde stool on which he sat was his throne.

Donnally knew that Mauricio was dead for them; it was only his possessions that were still alive. He’d already heard people talking about how Mauricio’s house could be used as a real estate office and how his front yard would be perfect for displaying tractors or snowmobiles. Just about everybody in town had been driving by and wondering what was going to happen with the Aguilera place, and many were conniving about how they could get it cheap.

Donnally glanced toward the dining room and spotted ex-sheriff Wade Pipkins’s waves of white hair mounding up beyond the pass-through counter from the kitchen. He suspected that Pipkins was going to miss Mauricio more than anyone else. Not miss Mauricio the person, just the idea of him. Miss the opportunity to opine about what was wrong with U.S. immigration policy loud enough for Mauricio to hear. Miss giving Mauricio the stare he otherwise reserved for homeless people and suspects and Hispanic day laborers.

For Pipkins, all Hispanics were Mexicans. Even the Guatemalans, and Salvadorans, and Peruvians. He called them Pancho or Paco or Pedro. And when he looked at them, all he wanted to see was their hats off and their gazes lowered, especially when he was hiring them to clear brush on the dozens of properties he owned in the county.

The popping of bacon grease on the grill brought Donnally back to the present and to the cold half-and-half in his hand.

“Thanks, boss.” Will, Donnally’s cook, reached out a tattooed arm to take the carton. “The funeral go okay?”

Donnally shrugged. “What could go wrong?”

“I don’t know.” Will smiled, then pointed through the window toward the abandoned cars and rusting washing machines in Mauricio’s side yard. “He never seemed to get around to finishing anything he started.”

Will’s smile faded and he lowered his voice, as if not wanting to be overheard by Pipkins.

“What’s this I hear about the name on the stone? Singleton came by. He said the name was Quintero or Quintana or something.”

That was another reason not to bother with a headstone, Donnally thought. There would be less to explain.

Donnally responded with the lie he’d worked out as he’d driven back from the cemetery the day before.

“Mauricio always used his grandfather’s last name out of respect,” Donnally said, “on his mother’s side.”

“That the kind of thing Mexicans do?”

“Yeah,” Donnally said, “lots of them.”

Donnally looked around the kitchen, then glanced at his waitress standing behind the counter.

“Can you two handle things for a couple of days?” Donnally asked.

“Sure, boss. I’ll even keep Ruby at my place if you want. Where’re you going?”

Donnally thought for a moment. He wasn’t sure of the where, or even the why. He finally settled on an answer that didn’t even satisfy himself.

“Let’s just say I’m going to deliver a letter.”

Chapter 4

“Get off my property,” a deep male voice yelled at Donnally through the closed front door of the West Berkeley cottage.

The smell of rot and mold infused Donnally’s nostrils, seeping from the yard behind him that had long since gone native with generations of intermingled grasses and weeds: the green, the yellow, and the brown composted by rain and heat and trampling shoes. Even the house’s blue paint seemed to have surrendered, fading into the gray of the bleached wood siding underneath.

“Subpoena me or leave me alone,” the man said. “My lawyer told you assholes that already.”

A gap appeared between the frame of the window on the right side of the door and the blue wool blanket that served as its curtain. Brown fingers gripped the material, the fingernails ragged and yellowed, and two eyes looked out from the shadowed interior.

Donnally took off his Giants cap as if disarming himself, then scratched his head and said, “I’m not here about anything that involves subpoenas.”

A wry smile exposed tar-stained teeth. “But you’re a cop, right?”

There was no point in pretending. Once you’ve got a cop’s eyes, a cop’s walk, and a cop’s face, no one is going to mistake you for anything else.

“Once,” Donnally said, “but not anymore.” He then made a show of glancing back toward the sidewalk, where a handful of crack and marijuana dealers were waiting for the mid-afternoon rush, then side to side at the apartment buildings flanking the house and framing the yard like the walls of a box canyon. “You think a cop would’ve come here alone?”

The gap widened and the rest of the face appeared. Mid-sixties. Long, thin. The scleras of his jaundiced eyes were just a shade lighter than his skin, and there was too much of that, as though he’d suffered a sudden weight loss. The man pulled the curtain further aside, then looked to Donnally’s left, checking for a second person.

Donnally spotted the man’s right elbow extending from behind his body, but his hand was concealed. He couldn’t stop his mind from transforming itself into a booking

sheet. 12021 of the California Penal Code. Felon in possession of a firearm.

“What do you want?” the man said.

“I’m trying to get a hold of Willie Goldstine, the guy they used to call Sonny.”

The man’s face didn’t change expression.

“How come?”

“About the New Sky Commune.”

“Son of a bitch. Another asshole writing a book.”

“That’s not it,” Donnally said. “I’m trying to locate a girl, I mean a woman. Her name is Anna. She was dropped off there by her brother in 1965.”

The man’s eyes flickered. Donnally couldn’t tell whether it was recognition or calculation.

“What’s it to you?”

“Somebody in her family left her some money.”

“So you’re a PI.”

“Just playing the part to help a buddy.”

“Maybe he should’ve come himself.”

“He would’ve, but he’s dead.”

Donnally watched the man’s smile fade.

“Then he should’ve come sooner.”

“Look, man, I need to know if you’re Sonny. If not, I’ve got to move along.”

“How do I know you’re not really here about Tsukamata?”

Donnally repeated the name, then said, “I don’t even know what that is.”

“It’s not a that. It’s a him. The cop who got killed.” The man laughed. “You stupid or do you think I’m stupid?”

“Neither. I’m just not from around here.” Donnally pointed north. “I’m from Shasta. I didn’t even know a cop got killed. Haven’t even read the paper since I arrived and didn’t hear it on the radio driving down. When did it happen?”

“Nineteen seventy-five.”

Donnally threw up his hands. “How am I supposed to know what happened over thirty years ago?”

“It’s been on the news a lot lately.”

“And it had something to do with you?”

The man shook his head.

“You lost me. Then why are we—” Donnally then understood the why. “I get it. Somebody’s now saying you did it and you’re thinking I’m somehow trying to box you in?”

The man flashed a smile. “If I was Sonny.”

Donnally didn’t smile back. “Yeah. If you were Sonny.”

More of the picture came into focus.

“Let me guess,” Donnally said. “People have been trying to break your alibi. And you’re thinking I’m one of them . . . if you were Sonny.”

“About every five years some retired cop gets a bug up his ass, wanting to be some kind of cold case hero. Get his face on *60 Minutes* or a cable TV crime show, then make a buck selling his memoirs.”

Donnally folded his arms across his chest and exhaled. “How do we get around this roadblock? I really want to find this gal.”

Sonny let go of the blanket. A moment later the door opened.

“Wait here,” Sonny said. “I’m gonna call my lawyer. He’s in the city.”

“Who’s that?”

Sonny narrowed his eyebrows. “I thought you wasn’t from around here.”

“I was a cop in San Francisco.”

“Mark Hamlin.”

Donnally felt his stomach tighten. Hamlin hated cops, loved money, and made every case into a political cause. Ten years earlier, he was on TV almost daily. Rimless glasses. Black hair slicked back like snake scales. Just an hour after the shootout that ended Donnally’s career, Hamlin was on television claiming that the cops—Donnally and his police department conspirators—had instigated it in order to start a Mexican gang war.

“You don’t need to call—”

But Sonny was already dialing.

Sonny glanced back and forth between a business card on the coffee table and the number pad on his cell phone, then waited as the call connected.

“It’s Sonny . . . doin’ okay . . . Look, a guy’s here about the old days . . . no . . . New Sky . . . I don’t know.”

Sonny looked back toward the door. “What’s your name?”

Donnally told him and Sonny repeated it. He listened for a moment, then handed over the phone. “He wants to talk to you.”

Donnally put it to his ear. “This is Donnally.”

“How you doing, man?”

Donnally recognized the nasal whine, but not the tone. Hamlin sounded like he meant it.

“I felt really bad about you getting shot,” Hamlin said. “What do you want with my client?”

Donnally said as much as he’d already told Sonny.

“How’d you end up knocking on his door?” Hamlin asked.

“I found a bunch of names in an old book about Berkeley communes and he’s the first one I got a lead on who wasn’t dead, drugged, or deranged.”

The old Hamlin voice returned. Half question. Half accusation. “Is this for real?”

“Yeah. But I don’t know how to prove it.” Donnally looked over at Sonny. He could see the outline of a small revolver in his front pants pocket. “Wait. Maybe I can.” He held his palm up toward Sonny, telling him not to panic. “I checked over at the courthouse. Sonny’s got two felony convictions, and he’s got a gun on him. The feds could lock him up in Leavenworth for twenty years.”

Sonny glared at Donnally, clenching his fists.

Donnally kept his hand up. “But I’m not interested in hurting the guy.”

“Shit,” Hamlin said. “I told him to get rid of that thing. One of these days his door’s gonna get kicked in. They won’t even need to convict him on the murder. At his age, twenty years on a federal gun beef would be a life sentence.” Hamlin fell silent for a moment. “I’ve got an idea. How about you work for me?”

“I thought you hated—”

“Just so you can’t use anything he tells you to hurt him. Attorney-client privilege. You had a reputation as a straight shooter. I’ll trust you in this.”