

Chapter One

I stood at the sink in running shorts staring out the window admiring the gorgeous play of light as it fell across the valley, grateful to be home again. It had been a long flight the night before from Chicago after a much-delayed departure, followed by an exhausting drive from San Francisco down the Salinas Valley to reach home. I had gotten only a few hours' sleep before I awoke to watch the dawn, as was my habit. I was looking forward to a quiet morning—a long run in the hills and then a trip up the draw to the little zendo where I meditate. Meditation had saved my life, providing me an unflinching anchor during my darkest hours in prison. The irony that meditation was a gift bestowed in prison never escaped me. Prison—and meditation—taught me the great value of staying in the moment.

A quicksilver flash of sunlight on a windshield caught my eye, a car turning off the highway over to the coast into my place. It was early for visitors, not yet eight, and I didn't recognize the dark sedan that clattered across the cattle guard and disappeared into the trees to climb the hill to the house.

I grabbed a T-shirt and pulled it on. Cup of coffee in hand, I went out on the porch and watched the Crown Victoria pull up in the circle drive. Doc, the big mixed-breed dog who shared my life, stood attentive off toward the barn, ears up like outfielders' mitts, nose sniffing the air to discern the truth of our guest.

I sighed wearily when Bobby Higgins stepped from the car. I could feel his stare even though I couldn't see his eyes through the dark aviator sunglasses he wore. Higgins and I had grown up together but had never been on the best of terms—even before I was sentenced to prison for murder. And my being exonerated and released certainly didn't win any sympathy from him. He had been the deputy sheriff who'd arrested me. The arrest had helped win him a fast track to detective with the Los Robles County Sheriff's Department. He chafed seeing me out of prison, my having a life he believed I didn't deserve.

"Morning," I called out as he crossed the dirt yard leading to the steep steps up to the porch. It didn't surprise me that he knew where I lived, even though he'd never been out to the house. I'd bought the remote piece of property and built the house myself with the money I was awarded from the civil suit against the county for the department's faulty handling of the case.

Higgins stopped at the bottom of the stairs and looked up at me, taking my measure.

"Want some coffee?"

"I want to know where you were three nights ago," he demanded. He started up the steps toward me.

"G'day to you, too," I replied. "Why are you so interested in my doings?"

"Just answer the question, Cain."

I settled instinctively into the gentle Tai Chi stance I often took when rip currents swirled around me. I drew a breath and exhaled, settling calmly, “rooting” myself, my bare feet absorbing the warmth of the early sun on the porch decking.

“You want to come in, Bobby?” I said.

I watched Higgins’s face flush. When we were in school, everybody knew him as Bobby, but since he made detective he was insistent that people call him Robert. My reverting to his boyhood name was a kind of verbal Aikido move, using the force of one’s opponent’s attack to throw him off balance. I stood breathing easily.

“You have any idea why I’m here?”

“Should I?”

“Goddamn, man!” Higgins snorted. “Don’t you follow the news?”

“Been out of town. Just got back a few hours ago.”

“Where were you?”

“Away.”

“Can you prove it?”

“You want the number for the Deputy Chief of the Chicago Police Department?”

Higgins made a disdainful face and half turned where he could look down the length of the porch toward the barn. Doc had settled with his nose down between his paws, keenly observing the stranger who’d come calling.

Higgins inhaled sharply, then sighed loudly. “You know anything about the death of Abby McCaskill?” he said, turning back to observe my reaction.

The news caused a hitch in my breathing. I steadied the rhythm. We stared at each other for a long moment.

“I’m really sorry to hear that,” I said finally, my voice almost a whisper. “What happened?”

“Do you know anything or not? It looks like the kinda thing you’d know something about.”

There was two ways one might interpret Higgins’s comment: That I, Jake Cain, was in demand for my ability to provide assistance to law enforcement across the country in solving crimes and finding missing people. Or that I’d served four years of a life sentence for murder. For many people, it still didn’t matter that I’d subsequently been fully exonerated. Despite my winning a suit against the county and being awarded a large judgment, there were those who thought I’d gotten away with murder. Most had forged hardened opinions about me long ago when I was young and out of control, always getting hauled in for something—drinking, smoking dope, joy riding, even burning down a neighbor’s barn once. Higgins was a charter member of that group.

He and those of like mind thought my peculiar psychic talents were just another scam I was running. Precious few had any inkling that as a young boy, I hated being able to “know” and “see” things others could not. I felt demon possessed. It was only while I was in prison that I came to view it otherwise.

“I’m sorry. I don’t know anything about Abby’s death.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet you don’t,” Higgins seethed under his breath.

I inhaled long and slow and let the dig go. “What happened?”

He turned and looked out at the view from my porch. It was one of the things I loved about the place, but I imagined Higgins saw it only as testament to a grave injustice.

“Raped and murdered three nights ago,” he said dispassionately. “Up in the Casa Grande Estates development.”

I knew the place. Knew it well in fact. I used to hike up through there when I was a kid. A big developer from LA was putting in a high-end gated community—or at least trying to. But as if out of nowhere a group of Native Americans had coalesced to block it, claiming the site was sacred ground.

I sighed deeply, my eyes drifting out to gaze over the valley. One moment the world is steady—the next it’s in chaos. Meditation and anchoring oneself in Taoist disciplines doesn’t make you bulletproof to the world. The great lesson of the Tao was that everything was always in flux. Abby was here. Now she was gone.

Higgins shuffled his feet nervously. He slipped his aviator glasses back on. “I got my eye on you, Cain. I just wanted to drop by to put you on notice.”

I slow-cycled another breath. “Thanks, Bobby,” I said quietly.

“*Fuck you,*” he said as he spun and went down the steps toward his car. “Just remember,” he called back as he opened the car door. “I got my eye on you.”

I watched Bobby Higgins as he spun his tires in the dirt and headed back down the hill. This was not going to be the day I had imagined. Not by any stretch of the imagination. I had to get dressed and immediately go find my dear friend Maggie—Abby McCaskill’s mother.