

Justice Squared

By Ted Gross (Rex Bolt)

Chapter One

Chris said to the guy next to him, “The difference, in your opinion? Between her and the ones in the record stores?”

“First of all, my friend,” the guy said. “There *are* no more record stores.”

“That’s a point well taken,” Chris said, “so forget that. I guess I just mean talent-wise.”

“I’d give her a B-plus,” the guy said. “Great range though, I’m hearing two octaves.”

The guy finished his beer and picked up his plastic cup of quarters and headed back to the slot machines.

Chris could tell the guy *did* know a little something about music, from a couple of comments he made . . . but then how could you only give her a B-plus if her range is so impressive?

The band performed two more and took a break. The four of them coming down from the little stage into the bar area . . . a guitar player, keys guy, drummer and the female vocalist. And of course these days the keyboard person could synthesize the heck out of nearly any sound they were trying to emulate, from a bluegrass banjo on down to a line of tubas in a marching band, to a dang full orchestra.

They were called ‘Luella and the Capris’, is what the electronic sign at the entrance to the lounge said, though you had to be kind of quick to read it because there was other stuff rotated in--Texas Hold-em seats open, progressive slots jackpot updates, the blackjack tournament taking final entries, the all-you-can-eat king crab legs tonight in the buffet.

Luella was at a table with the drummer, both of them roaming around their phones.

Chris thought should he or shouldn't he a couple of times, and went over there and sat down with them.

The drummer didn't pay attention, his thumbs continuing to work the phone, and Luella finished up her business too before she looked up and said, "Well, *that's* direct . . . we don't mind, as long as you're a fan." Following it with a nice-enough smile.

"You're really Luella?" Chris said.

"No, Terri," she said. "Why?"

Chris said, "So once people get past that voice . . . you have some spunk as well."

Terri said, "That's what my husband said when we met. Not in those exact words."

Oh boy, the husband card right away.

"He one of the band guys then?" Chris said.

"My hubby? No, no. That would never work."

"Either way, I didn't mean to be cozying up to you, if you got the wrong impression . . . you've been kind of blowing me away up there though. Echoing a *few* great voices. Karen Carpenter, the main one."

Terri gave Chris her full attention for the first time and said, "Well now *I'm* impressed . . . Not everyone comes up to me and picks that out. She's an idol of mine."

"She had that calm, clear voice," Chris said. "Straight and pure and angelic. The exact opposite of Whitney Houston and Celine Dion, who *never* sang a straight note."

"Wow," Terri said, "you are *so* right . . . So I might as well ask, what other *great* voices did I remind you of."

"Two others. Harder to pinpoint, just bits and pieces jumping out, but I was thinking Patsy Cline, and Linda Ronstadt."

"Well I'll take both of those," Terri said. "The problem now, are you going to stick around for the third set?"

"Why? I *shouldn't*?"

“No, it’s just that you’ve raised the bar on me. The pressure’s on.”

Chris appreciated the humor, and she seemed like a happy person, but what did you really know.

Chris said, “A couple things I always wonder, when I hear a terrific lounge act like yours. The first thing, dumb question, but you can’t all live *here*, right?”

“No, Reno.”

“You’re kidding. That’s like, 4 hours.”

“They put us up for the gig. We do three-night minimums. We’re headed to Wendover next. Then Tonopah. What was the other question?”

“What the difference is . . . you, and the big stars.”

“You mean you can’t tell?”

“No.”

“That’s very nice of you . . . The answer is, the backstory, for one.”

Chris asked what that meant and she said they had to tune up but stick around and she might get into it.

Chris decided he didn’t have any other pressing engagements tonight, so why not?

What he was doing here unfortunately, in Bingham, Nevada, three-quarters of the way across the state, was hiding out.

Though he liked to think of it more as keeping a low profile, which was less dramatic.

You were nearer to Salt Lake City than anywhere else, that being three-and-a-half hours, though fine, you did have Winnemucca back the other way a little closer.

Wendover, which Terri mentioned, was an hour-and-a-half but it didn’t count for anything because there was nothing there except for three big casino hotels that had sprung up in the high desert, with an airstrip to haul in the high rollers.

It was interesting there, how they built the casinos literally six inches from the Utah state line, but it made sense, why make people waste extra time to get there.

You might as well throw the town of Battle Mountain into the mix too, an hour *west* of Bingham, but again very little to it other than the legal fireworks outlet, which tended to draw the out-of-staters who wanted to explode stuff back home.

Chris was residing currently at the Quality Inn next door to the casino. He'd started off at the Super 8, but rational or not, he felt more exposed out there on 227, so day before yesterday he switched it up.

From the Quality Inn you hopped out your door, crossed the parking lot about eight steps and right into the casino, *The Palermo*, through the side entrance where they spun the big wheel of fortune, which they called the *Wizard Of Odds*.

You kept going and you were in pretty good hands, he had to admit.

Five restaurants, a 24-hour Starbucks, an observation area on the mezzanine level where you could sit under a massive glass dome and look out at the wide open spaces and mountains in the distance.

The lounge every evening, kicking off the live music at 4, with a couple late shows after that, one of which was Terri's *Luella and the Capris* act.

You had cocktail waitresses scurrying around at all hours in what Chris figured were supposed to be lacey Roman tunics, though there wasn't a whole lot to them, political correctness not a factor inside the casino.

In keeping with the theme of the place, there were fountains and a hanging garden and a fake Roman column you could bump into about every two feet, everything oversized. You even had a bowling alley and an indoor mini-golf setup and a mechanical bull, if you were a fan of that stuff.

But essentially, you could spend all day in here, and all night too if you wanted or couldn't sleep. You could eat and drink almost for free, between the bargain buffet and the complimentary appetizers they came around with in the lounge, which were pretty darn tasty, and honestly, the place was worth it for the people-watching alone.

Chris had always liked casinos, and *The Palermo* had a different feel than most of the Reno and Vegas ones, a little cozier, despite it being pretty huge and going all out with the glitzy Roman element.

Maybe it was because you were out in the desert and the people working here had more of a small town quality, who knows.

Of course the one thing Chris *wasn't* interested in was gambling, which every last detail in the place was engineered to have you *do*, but that didn't matter, you could enjoy all the perks without participating and nobody ever bothered you.

Bottom line, this would have been a perfect stopover on a cross-country drive, or even a great self-contained vacation . . . except in this case he was forced to be here.

What happened, was a couple weeks ago he gets a call from a detective in Modesto.

The guy, perfectly polite, asks if he wouldn't mind speaking to a colleague down there in SoCal, and Chris robotically agreed right away, though when he recovered slightly and tried to ask a couple of questions, the detective told him it would be easier for the colleague to explain, and he thanked him and wished him a nice day.

So Chris called the LA guy like he was supposed to, and the guy says now's a good time and where is he?

This panicked Chris a little more, a cop showing up and snooping around *period*, and he offered to meet the guy somewhere, but the guy, a Detective Hamm, said no, it'd be better if he came his way.

An hour later Detective Hamm arrives, a brown, unmarked vehicle with about ten antennas sticking off the roof pulling into the *Cheater Five*.

Hamm had a uniform guy with him as well.

Chris's brain was pretty well fried with the possibilities at this point.

The likeliest one was that the old man Mel had called and claimed he got assaulted.

Less likely but still a wild possibility, Chris had unmasked the Zodiac and the police wanted to follow up. How they would have found out is hard to say, though maybe Mel, after 48 years on the run, confessed.

Taking it a step further, could he have turned himself in because he feared Chris was going to come back? So he contacts the police for his own protection? Nah, that sounded off.

Either way, someone had to have identified Chris, which probably meant someone took down his license plate when he parked across the street from Mel's . . . maybe a suspicious neighbor, or maybe Mel had a wife in a back room, after all, when it was going on . . . maybe the old guy himself, though that seemed the least likely given his condition when Chris departed.

Hamm and the other guy shook hands at the apartment door and started to automatically come in, and Chris held firm, not getting out of the way but suggesting they go down to the pool. Ken wasn't home, he was at work at the library, but still, don't let the cops in your house if you don't have to, even if they're selling Christmas cookies to raise money for kids in hospitals.

You could see Hamm wasn't thrilled with that, but they sat at one of the patio tables. It was mid-day, there was a gal in the water swimming some easy laps, and Chris knew her a little bit by now, she was a flight attendant for Southwest, no spring chicken, probably close to his age, but she was fit and the two cops followed her up and down the pool for a minute.

Hamm lowered his voice and said, "Reason we're here, a gentleman passed, up north, and we were given your name."

Leaving it alone right there, watching Chris carefully for a reaction.

Of course, the terrifying part, there were *two* men that passed recently up north. You had Sullivan, and you had McCall. Who his friends called May on Facebook.

Chris was thinking, hold on though, you had a Modesto detective contacting him . . . but is that how it could *work*? Someone saw him in Modesto, picked up his license plate . . . and then he got connected back to Chico? or Sebastopol? . . . Or God help him, Chip, right down the road?

Even in this extremely uncomfortable situation, being essentially cross-examined by two guys right in your face . . . Chris had enough of a handle on common sense to decide those were too big a stretch.

He said, "Sorry, *what* gentleman?"

"An older man," Hamm said. "Horace Williard. He died on Monday."

"What was that, the 13th?" Chris said, trying to stall for a second and get his timeline straight.

"Correct," Hamm said, looking at him closely again.

A couple things now . . . First, a relief to have it apparently confirmed that this had nothing to do with Sullivan or McCall, or Chip . . . Second, a bit of a shock though that Mel all of a sudden died . . . Third, he'd clarified the timeline in his head, and luckily he'd be in the clear, even if someone did take note of him parked at Mel's.

It would have been Sunday, November 5th, that Floyd got into it with Ned at the *Crow's Nest*, so it was a couple days later when he and Ken drove Allison and Monica home . . . meaning, the running around asking questions about Mel and checking the yearbooks, that was Thursday . . . So, Chris heading out to Modesto, leaving Ken at Gloria's even though the kid wanted to come with him, that'd be Friday the 10th.

And since he and Ken returned to MB on Saturday, the 11th, he'd be 100 percent in the clear . . . wouldn't he?

Separately, not something you were going to discuss with anyone . . . But it was sure ironic that the stuff he *did* do wasn't necessarily on anyone's radar--although there'd been ominous scares here and there--but the one where he *didn't* do anything, you got these two hard-nosed dicks sitting here at the moment, asking you to tell them about it.

Chris said to Hamm, "I'm not familiar with that name."

Hamm stayed quiet for a moment. "Well that's interesting," he said, "Since the information we got . . .," flipping open a notebook, "you were located speaking to the gentleman--the one and only--at . . . it looks like 319 Marigold Street . . . Doesn't ring a bell at all?"

“It really doesn’t,” Chris said.

“I see,” Hamm said, giving it a fake smile. “So is there anything else you can help us with--and you can take your time, dig deep into that memory bank, we got no rush--as far as what happened to this particular Mr. Williard?”

“I wish I could,” Chris said, “but I got nothing.”

The uniform guy opened his mouth for the first time. He said, “Don’t fuck with us Bud. You *were* in the area.”

Chris figured this was *good cop, bad cop* now, one guy friendlier than the other on purpose. He said, “I *was* in San Francisco last week. But I came back on Saturday.”

Figuring that alone, if they checked it out--and he had plenty of people down here who could confirm it--should get him off the hook, at least the part about being in Modesto Monday.

But Hamm said, “Back from doing what?”

Which was starting to get more than a little disconcerting.

“Well I’m trying to move *here*, completely,” Chris said, “but I’m from *there* . . . so . . .”

“So you got one foot both places still?” Hamm said.

“Exactly right, unfortunately,” Chris said.

Hamm gave him the penetrating long look again. Chris figured it was something he probably practiced in the mirror and pulled out regularly . . . except he needed this like a hole in the head.

Hamm said, “Well, we’ll ask you to stay put, if you could, for a little while . . . Since you say you go back and forth a lot.” Winking at Chris.

“Just until we can clear this up,” the uniform said . . . with the sincerity of an undertaker.

“Once we check back with Detective Polski up north,” Hamm said, “we’ll have some follow-up for you, no doubt.”

“I understand,” Chris said, “and I’ll be right here if you need me.”

“Good to hear,” Hamm said, and the two cops got up and left, no handshakes on the way out.