

I

WHEN YOU LOOK back at something that went really badly wrong, it's weird how you kid yourself into thinking that there must have been some pivotal point around which it all happened. I mean, things had been going pretty badly for me for a while, but I didn't get really freaked out until the meeting in the diner, off of Interstate 15. If I believed in pivotal points, then that would be it.

The diner was one of those crazy, shiny rail carriages on stilts, all polished aluminum and bits of zig-zag piping in blue and red, showy as hell. Out in the desert fifty miles south of Vegas it looked pretty cool in a proud and lonely American way. Anywhere else it would have been really tacky. All around the land was flat and dry and you could just make out a car dealership and a gas station in the distance. I remember everything about that diner, which

is strange because there's a load of stuff that has happened since then that I don't remember so well. I remember the music they were playing, some corny Hispanic pop dripping with emotion, the lead singer baring his lovelorn soul. I remember the smells – disinfectant, coffee, burnt fat and a faint whiff of the fake orange cheese that gets squeezed onto hotdogs. I remember feeling pretty jittery in that diner on account of all the coffee refills I'd been drinking. I don't drink much coffee but I'd had a few hours to kill and not a lot else to do.

Of course I remember the waitress. She had dark hair and green eyes; that combination knocks me out. I also like it when a girl's lips curl up and out a little, but not too much; she had that going too. To tell the truth, I have a great memory for cute girls. Really I do. Otherwise my memory is not good, like I was saying, but I always remember cute girls. In fact, I don't just remember cute girls, I even *invent* them. Sometimes I dream about cute girls that I swear I've never seen before. I'm sure it doesn't only happen to me, but it makes me feel better because I do forget a lot of people and so long as I keep inventing plenty more I guess I break even. I'm OK with that.

Anyway, I didn't want to look like a moron in front of the waitress. I mean, I'd been drinking coffee and staring out the window for most of the morning already. So I figured I'd ask her for a pen and maybe write down all the important stuff so I wouldn't forget anything when Special Agent Kramer arrived.

I called her over and asked her for a pen, politely. I'm always polite to girls, I can't help it. Even if I don't like a girl I'm polite to her. It can get annoying. The waitress was the kind of girl that every guy is polite to; even tough-ass guys get all polite and simpering

when they talk to a cute girl. But like I was saying, I asked if she would lend me her pen. She looked at me real steady, then she put her hand in the pocket of her apron and took out a small, black Dictaphone. She turned half around and said something into it. I couldn't hear what she was saying but I could see her lips moving. I could also see the back of her ear. I'm not an ear-fetishist or anything, but it was the most perfect ear I'd ever seen. Flawless. It makes me happy and at the same time a bit sad when I see something so perfect. Happy because it's there and sad because I know it can't last. I was still staring at it when she turned back round and handed me the Dictaphone. It really was small, smaller than the palm of my hand. The Dictaphone had two buttons, one to play and one to record. I pressed play and heard her voice say:

'Ask me again, Señor.'

I pressed record and spoke into it. 'Can I borrow a pen, please?' I said. And then, as an afterthought, 'Por favor.'

She stared at me pretty seriously the whole time. It felt like she was testing me. If she was, I guess I passed because she took the Dictaphone back from me, held it to her ear and listened. Then she nodded a curt little nod, replaced the Dictaphone in the pocket of her apron and withdrew her hand, this time holding a red pen. I thought she was going to hand it to me but instead she put one end of it in her mouth and then – I'm not kidding – she leant forward so that I could grasp the other end. I took the pen from her mouth and she continued looking at me pretty steady. I looked back as steady as I could and then I raised one eye-brow; I'm really good at raising just one eyebrow, you can ask anyone. I'm a natural, I never had to practise, I swear. Izzy – that's my sister – she used to go crazy when I

did it. But the waitress wasn't impressed. She just turned around and walked back to the register. There was a lipstick mark on the damp end of the pen, so I wiped it off on the first napkin. Then I started writing on the next napkin in the dispenser.

As soon as I started writing I began to feel like a weight was being lifted. There was so much stuff in my head that only I knew, and that no one else would believe, and putting it onto that napkin got it out there and made it feel real. I knew it was all true, but when everyone else is so goddamn sceptical, and when you don't have any records or anything like that, well, even you start to wonder. I mean, for Chrissake, officially I am no longer the only Charlie Conti. In fact, in many ways I am the more insignificant Charlie Conti. OK, so I'm real, you can see me and touch me and all, but that doesn't mean a whole lot to the files and the computers and the massive blind institutions that seem to determine my identity. I'll explain how I got into this mess in a minute, but that was the first thing I wrote on the topmost napkin, in big letters: "I AM REAL". What a crazy thing to write. What a crazy thing to have to convince someone of.

The end of the pen got stuck a couple of times, on account of the napkin being a bit soft for writing on. And when the pen didn't get stuck it left a corrugated surface behind it, like the wake behind a scalloping boat. But despite that it felt good to write some stuff down. It felt like I was testifying, testifying to the truth, so no matter what Special Agent Kramer said to me, or got me to say, the truth would be out there – even if it only got used to mop up spilt coffee. You see, it was Special Agent Kramer I was waiting to meet in the diner.

II

IF I WANT to explain who I am, and why I was in Los Angeles, and how I got into the mess I'm in, I guess I've got to go back a few years. Maybe not all the way back, although I don't think that anything is ever totally irrelevant. But for now I'm going to stick to the main points, like how I got to LA, and why I didn't really know anyone there, and why I liked that.

I grew up in Italy and I didn't come to the US until I was twelve years old. My mother decided to move to New York because she said she couldn't lead a normal life in Italy. She was an actress. Italians I meet have always heard of Isabella Conti; she was really famous. Some people say I look like her and I guess that might be true – I've got a big mouth like her and my eyelashes are pretty long for a boy. But she died when I was thirteen and so it's a bit

hard to remember. We used to have a nanny – because of my sister Izzy, not because of me – and she told me that my mother died of a broken heart. That’s what I used to believe, but recently I read someplace that she died of an overdose. Same difference, I guess.

After my mother died I was sent to a boys’ boarding school called Belmont, up in Massachusetts. I lasted a year and a half there before I got kicked out in the middle of my sophomore year, when I was fifteen. I told the trustees of my mother’s estate that I didn’t want to go to another boarding school, so I got sent to a number of day schools in the city, and as well as going to day schools I was taught by private tutors. My mother had made a lot of money so the trustees were happy to employ the tutors and also a cook and a housekeeper to look after me in our old apartment. You wouldn’t have thought it would be lonely with so many people around all the time but it was, I promise you. Then last summer the estate was made over to me. I decided I’d had enough of living in our old apartment with everyone trying to tell me what to do all the time, and so I decided to go to acting school in Los Angeles.

I guess I stuck out a bit when I first arrived at the Hollywood School of Dramatic Arts. For one, I was younger than most of the other students – I was only just eighteen. And also I’m not much of an extrovert. In my first semester the other students were trying to be the most extroverted, the most confident, the first to get noticed. There were guys who changed the color of their hair every week and girls who shouted about their neuroses in the cafeteria. I don’t like to stick out and for that reason I got noticed the most, which is kind of ironic. But I guess you’re wondering why I was there, if I’m not an extrovert and I don’t like getting noticed. Actually I didn’t

want to be an actor at all. I just wanted to learn about acting. It's pretty interesting. And I guess I also hoped that, by being around actors, I would end up feeling closer to my mother.

My mother never told me who my father was. I have a pretty good idea because I know he was American and I've seen a few of my mother's movies where there were some pretty hot scenes with an American actor called George Chesterton. He's handsome in an all-American way – blond and tanned with a big old rancher's jaw. But I'm not actually so sure it's him, and even if it is, I've read that he already has a load of kids from a load of different women, so I don't want him to be my father anyway.

I've got a sister too. She's called Isabella, like my mom, but I've never called her that. I just call her Izzy, because that's what she likes. She's got one chromosome too many, which is a pretty small defect if you ask me – I mean, there's no way you could even *see* a chromosome – but it's really significant because it means she's got this condition called Down's Syndrome. I understand her pretty well because we grew up together – she's only a few years younger than me, although she'll never really grow up, not like a normal girl.

When my mother died I was thirteen, like I said, and Izzy was ten. The trustees sent me to Belmont and Izzy to a residence for children with special needs in Maryland, about four hours drive from New York. I guess they meant well but I was pretty upset about it at the time and Izzy was too, except often she doesn't express herself very well. We'd only been in New York for a year by then. I'd been going to a grammar school in the city but I didn't really have any close friends. I guess my English wasn't so hot back then either.

While I was at Belmont, I used to go visit Izzy during the vacations. After the first six months she seemed pretty happy where she was, so I didn't use to worry about her too much. But man, did she love it when I came to visit. She'd have presents for me – all things she'd made herself – and she'd drag me from bedroom to bedroom and introduce me to the other residents. That used to freak me out a bit, especially at the beginning: a lot of her friends were pretty weird, drooling and grunting and stuff. Sometimes I just wanted to be with Izzy, but they wouldn't let me take her out without a supervisor, on account of my being a minor and all. I hate people listening in on personal stuff, so I never felt like talking to Izzy about mom or about Rome, which is where we used to live, or about any of that. I'd really have liked to though.

The last time I'd been to visit Izzy was in the summer, right after I graduated from Dalton. Dalton was the third day school I went to in the city after I got kicked out of Belmont. I didn't get kicked out of the other two but I wasn't happy at either so that's why I kept moving. I guess that's also why the trustees insisted on a full time tutor – to keep an eye on me. In fact I ended up having a number of tutors; they sort of came and went. But anyway, the last time I'd seen Izzy was at the summer barbecue party at her residence which is called Happy Lives – very corny, I know. I guess maybe it's a joke because the town it's in is called Paradise; 'Happy Lives' in Paradise. Whatever.

That summer I had a tutor called Martin. He was a pretty nice guy, and he had this British accent which made him sound like he'd just stepped out of a movie. I think the trustees thought that spending time with Martin would make me want to go to

‘Oxbridge’ (which actually means Oxford or Cambridge, but it took me a while to figure that out) or some Ivy League school. I guess they were also worried about me being not quite eighteen and about to inherit as much as I did.

I liked Martin, I really did. He could be pretty funny in this really dry British way. Also, he was much younger than all the old men who had been my tutors in the past. The only thing I didn’t like was when he started lecturing me. It’s not that I hate learning stuff, it’s just that if something is interesting then I kind of learn it anyway. I’m pretty good at picking stuff up but I was never a good student; I guess I just don’t like being told what to do. Martin wanted to be an academic so maybe he was just practising for that, but I could tell it annoyed him to get interrupted. Some smart people are like that, they hate being interrupted. Most of the time Martin wasn’t like that, but sometimes he could be.

He also looked pretty funny – he was really pale with this kind of floppy, orange hair. During the first week I messed him around some: I’d suggest going for walks or playing golf or something, always at midday, and in the evening I’d see how red and sunburnt he’d got. Sometimes he made his handkerchief into some weird kind of hat by tying a knot at each corner. That used to crack me up, that hat. I’d never seen anything that looked so dumb and I used to be pretty outspoken about it, but Martin wasn’t too bothered. He used to say: *‘De gustibus et coloribus non disputandum est,’* which means something like that there’s no accounting for taste. When I look back at it now I think that maybe Martin did some of those dumb things because he knew I would find them funny; I didn’t realize that at the time though. However, I did realize after that

first week that he was a pretty decent guy, even if I did still think he was kind of dumb, and so I lightened up on him some.

A week before I graduated from Dalton I got an invitation through the mail to *The finger-lickin' good summer BBQ party* at Happy Lives. I asked Martin if he'd drive me – my mom's old Merc was in the garage and the attendant was paid to keep it roadworthy. Martin was pretty hesitant, what with driving on the right side of the road and it not being his car and all. But he could see this was a good reason to leave the city, so he told me to write back to Happy Lives and accept the invitation. Man, you wouldn't have believed that a guy who wears a handkerchief for a hat could be so damn correct. He made me reply like this:

Charlie Conti esq. acknowledges receipt of the invitation to The finger-lickin' good summer BBQ party at Happy Lives and gratefully accepts.

That killed me, that reply, and I think even Martin thought it was pretty funny, except he never let on.

We bought a couple of jumbo bags of tootsie rolls – Izzy is crazy about them – then we took the elevator down to the basement garage to get mom's old Merc. Martin complained about it not being stick shift and the first few hundred meters were pretty unsmooth – I was grateful for the seatbelt – but we were soon speeding out of Manhattan through the New Jersey turnpike towards Maryland. The city had been getting pretty humid and it felt great to leave. I was also kind of jacked up on tootsie rolls, and in the mood for kidding around.

'Hey, Marty,' I said.

'Please don't call me Marty.'

‘Sorry. Have you seen *Back to the Future*? That guy’s also called Marty, Marty McFly.’

Martin didn’t reply. He seemed to be concentrating pretty hard on driving the car. His arms were very straight, like he was braced for impact.

‘So, Marty, you got any hotties waiting for you back home?’

There were just two things that made Martin really angry: calling him Marty, and asking him about girls. That’s the crazy thing about really smart people. Even really smart people don’t realize that the only reason you say certain things is to see them get wound up.

‘That has nothing whatsoever to do with you, Charles.’

He only called me Charles when he was really angry. But, like I said, I wanted to wind him up. Looking back, I feel bad about that now. He was a pretty decent guy and he wasn’t all that old himself. Maybe he was very shy with girls, or he’d had his heart broken or whatever. I mean, you just never know. And when it comes to stuff like that, then being smart doesn’t help all that much. I’ve learnt that. But at the time I just said: ‘Come on, Marty. I bet you got a lot of girls hot for you... I bet you’re the beta-carotene love machine of Great Britain.’

Martin looked across at me. Even when they’re angry, smart people are impressed if you know stuff they don’t expect you to know.

*

Another reason why I get apprehensive at Happy Lives is that it can be pretty hard to know who’s got special needs and who’s a

supervisor or a carer or whatever. Now I know that sounds pretty mean, but I swear it's true. A lot of the special needs kids can seem pretty normal. They're friendly and competent with tending the barbecue and stuff like that, and a lot of them look pretty normal too. The supervisors can look pretty musty, but they're also friendly and competent with the barbecue, so it really is hard to tell who's who. I like to case it out a bit first, before talking to anyone; at least that way you get an idea of what's going on. That's what I suggested to Martin and he agreed, so we made for the food tent and avoided catching anyone's eye as we crossed the garden.

I was removing the walnuts from my Waldorf salad when a dowdy looking lady started speaking to me:

'You must be Charlie.'

This surprised me. I was pretty sure I had never seen the lady before, so I said: 'Yes Ma'am, I am. How did you know?'

'You look like Charlie,' she said, peering intently at me. Her eyes looked very big through her glasses.

'I do?'

'Izzy has told us all so much about you.'

'She has?' I wasn't feeling so talkative; like I say, I like to case it out a bit first.

The lady continued: 'Oh yes. All about how good you are at raising an eyebrow, and how you hate nuts and...'

As it happens I only really dislike walnuts, and especially in salad. But the old lady looked pretty pleased with herself, so I didn't want to set her right. I just said: 'Wow Ma'am, I guess you know me pretty well.' I actually meant it to sound friendly, but it came out kind of mocking. I hate it when that happens, and

it happens quite a lot. I say something and I want it to sound friendly but people think I'm mocking them. The worst thing is, there's just nothing you can do about it. I mean, you shouldn't apologise for something you never did in the first place. In fact, you shouldn't even talk about it because it confirms the suspicion in their minds. But I guess maybe I'm over-sensitive about this stuff; although it came out sounding kind of mocking to me, the old lady kept chatting away:

'Have you seen Izzy yet? No? Come, I'll show you where she is. I'm Ma Petri, by the way. I supervise on weekends.'

She was pretty good, old Ma Petri was. She led us out of the big tent, between the tables in the garden towards another, smaller tent. A couple of times some freaky-looking kid that was following us tried to grab my hand, but Ma Petri said, 'Not now my love, the young gentlemen are here to see Izzy,' and just kept on walking, so we did too. I felt a bit impolite doing that, but I figured Ma Petri knew what she was doing. She led us around to the back of the smaller tent where Izzy and three of her friends were making a pile of records for the DJ to play. I'd like to say that Izzy leapt into my arms when she saw me, but that wouldn't be true. It's funny – she can be pretty shy when she hasn't seen me for a while. Like I said, I'm not much of an extrovert either, so I kissed her on the cheek and introduced her to Martin. At that moment 'Cotton Eyed Joe' started to play. Izzy loves that song but I've got to say, it really bugs me. It's just kind of fake. I mean, originally it was a sad old song about a blind slave, then it got rerecorded as a dance track by a Swedish band so that overfed Americans can jiggle around and get off on some sanitised idea of their own folk heritage. But

at Happy Lives they get a real kick out of it. Suddenly the chairs in the garden were all empty and the dancing area in front of the tent was crowded with kids having a blast. I mean, technically they were pretty lousy dancers, just bouncing up and down and doing these corny moves, and being out of time and all. This one kid was swinging his arms like some crazy windmill, but I had to hand it to them, they really were having fun. And then I realized what I should do: I should take Izzy's hand and dance with her in the middle of the dance floor, right in the middle of all her friends. I mean, I know she tells her friends about me, and that she's pretty proud of me in her way. Boy, would she get a kick out of me and her dancing along to 'Cotton Eyed Joe'.

But I couldn't do it. I just couldn't do it. I usually have to be pretty smashed before I can dance anyway, and even then I don't know if I could dance to 'Cotton Eyed Joe'. Maybe it would've been easier if Martin hadn't been there. But I felt too embarrassed. And the worst thing was, I didn't even know what I was embarrassed of. Of being a lousy dancer? Not really – I'm fine with that. Of not having as much fun as everyone else? Well, maybe a little bit. But the more I thought about it, the more embarrassed I got. In fact, I felt embarrassed about being embarrassed. Sometimes it's not good to think about stuff too much.

I told Izzy to go and dance and that we would watch her. She bounced onto the dance floor holding hands with two of the girls who had been helping her arrange the records. The third girl went to stand next to the tent, to the side of the dancing area. She was wearing a New England Patriots shirt which was pretty big for her, and a strange choice too. She wasn't dancing but I saw that Izzy

and the other two girls on the dance floor kept looking across at her and waving and the girl in the football shirt smiled and waved back and seemed to be having fun in her way.

All the tables in the garden were empty now, so Martin and I sat down at one of them. To tell you the truth, I was starting to feel pretty down. What's the point of being educated and normal and all if you can't just have fun when a dumb song comes on and all the time you know you could have made someone really happy? From where I was sitting I could see Izzy on the dance floor, bouncing up and down opposite the crazy windmill guy and occasionally looking across to see if I was still watching. She really was having a blast.

At Belmont I had a Philosophy teacher called Mr. Rowland-Smith. He was very old and kind of bent – I mean physically – but he was a pretty funny guy all the same. He never got pissed or raised his croaky old voice, but man, did he know how to cut you down to size. You didn't want to mess with old Rowland-Smith or he'd make you the butt of some pretty sharp jibes. Except it wasn't so much the jibes themselves that hurt, it was more that he'd get the whole class laughing at you, even your buddies. The other thing about Rowland-Smith, he used to repeat a couple of phrases the whole time. His favourite was: 'The unexamined life is not worth living'. Boy, did he love that phrase. I guess sometimes it was applicable, like if you were asking about why you should bother with Ancient Greek and Philosophy and stuff, but he used to use it *all* the time. Anyway, I wished old Rowland-Smith could've seen Izzy having a blast with that crazy windmill guy. She looked so happy, she really did. But as for me, sitting on the white plastic

chairs with Martin, *examining* it all, I really felt that my whole way of looking at stuff was wrong and that maybe *my* life was not worth living. I know that sounds kind of dramatic, but I couldn't help thinking how simple it should be to go and dance with her and yet I couldn't do it. Like I said, it made me feel pretty sad, so I asked Martin if we could go and he said that was fine with him. I think he was kind of down himself.

That was the last time I saw Izzy. Martin and I drove back to New York that night and two weeks later the trustees signed my mother's estate over to me, on the condition that I pledged to look after Izzy as her legal guardian. I mean, the trustees had set up a fund for her and all that, but someone still had to sign the papers. Boy, did I sign a load of papers last summer. Then, a month later, I was accepted by the Hollywood School of Dramatic Arts in Los Angeles, so I found a realtor to sell the apartment in New York and I moved to LA. That summer barbecue party had taken place almost a year before, but as I sat in the diner fifty miles south of Vegas I thought how I wanted to see Izzy more than anything else in the world. That's why I'd left LA a couple of days before, and it's why I was headed east. That's also why it was convenient for me to meet Special Agent Kramer in the diner off of Interstate 15.