

## Diamonds and Cole

### TWO

Opening the front door of *The Sentinel* building felt to Cole like he was pushing it through sand. He really didn't want to go in. He could think of a thousand reasons to go in. *Have to* reasons but no *want to* reasons. He used to fly through the doors on the run, heart-pounding, adrenaline-pumping. He used to be the hot-shit reporter with the scoop of the day. Now he was doing well if he met the deadline for the stories the night editor assigned him.

Mick Brennan tried to throw Cole a bone now and again, but Brennan was tired and burned out. When Cole first came to the paper, Brennan became his mentor. "Got a ways to go, kid," he used to say. Brennan showed Cole that he hadn't really learned anything in college, and untaught him the bad habits he picked up there. Write, write, and rewrite. Brennan used up boxes of red, proofreading pencils and turned Cole into a first-class newspaperman. Cole would have done anything to show Mick he could do it his way: the *best* way. But he never got it quite good enough. Never a compliment, always a kick in the teeth. That was Brennan's style.

Cole had introduced her to Mick Brennan after spinning tales of the great newspaperman, and how much he meant to him.

"Too good for you, Cole," was all Brennan said as he walked away.

Cole could still see the hurt in her eyes as they walked back to the elevator. Something broke that day. A bond, an unspoken gentleman's understanding, between the new kid and the old lion, the hero and the eager-to-please sidekick. It was gone. Not long after that, Cole was gone, too. That was the first time he quit *The Sentinel*.

Cole had been 22 and Mick 42. Somehow, it was now twenty-odd-years later.

"What's the problem? You wanna move it?" a harsh voice jabbed from behind.

A brown shirt delivery man, heavy boxes to his chin, stood glaring at Cole. Attitudes seemed to be growing out of the sidewalk. When did service providers become the aggressors in the war on civility? It would have been easy to have shot back a smart rebuke to his societal underling, but why bother? The world Cole now lived in was beyond dueling with taunt-calved, community college dropouts in tight brown shorts. He pushed the door open, then let it swing back to hit the boxes. As the slurs and curses flew at his back, Cole went through the door marked *ID Badges Required Beyond This Point*.

"Afternoon, Cole."

"Greetings, Queen Jean."

Cole barely glanced at the black woman behind the front desk. How life changes things. Years before, as a new staff reporter, he had bribed a kid guarding the front door of a burned-out apartment building \$20 to get as far as the third floor, in hopes of getting an interview with Tashira, the firebrand orator of the Black Women's Urban Army. The Army hated men, hated whites, and really hated white men, but up he went and banged on the door like the landlord after late rent. An hour later, he left with a notepad full of quotes and a recipe for sweet potato pie. That was a different world. Ideals, high hopes, and a heartfelt belief in something that drove people to actually try to change the world. After five kids, fifty added pounds, and three men who took what they wanted and left with the first bump in the road, Tashira once again become Olajean Baker. The

radical daughter of the single hotel maid mother, who raised her to fight back, just celebrated her tenth year of sobriety and being the front desk receptionist at *The Sentinel*. A job she had thanks to Cole Sage. When the revolutionary fire had gone out in her, Cole still remembered the heart that burned white-hot for what should have been.

“Brennan’s been asking for you. Something about a dead kid or somethin.’ I really didn’t get much out of it.”

Cole gave her that silent smile that was now all-too-familiar and slipped through the swinging door at the counter.

Olajean seemed content. *Why am I so miserable?* Cole thought. Maybe it was turning 45. He always believed he would die in some adventurous blaze of glory. He got shot at in the Philippines, saw a car bomb go off in front of his hotel in Tel Aviv, and received enough death threats to wallpaper *The Sentinel* building. But here he was. When had he given up? Twenty-five years in the news business and he was at the bottom. No, lower than the bottom. He’d started at the bottom, and he was even lower now.

No one looked up as he made his way through the maze of cubicles. Mini flowerpots, kitty posters, and pictures of little leaguers, soccer stars, Brad Pitt, and big-eyed cartoon children blurred past him as he made his way to his corner of the world. Coffee cups, stacks of paper, and an old “Coming Soon to the Bijou” flyer decorated his carpeted “office.”

Cole made a half-hearted attempt at straightening his tie. He exhaled deeply as he stared at the numbers on the phone. Punching in 784, he waited.

“Brennan.”

“What’s up?”

“What, I don’t warrant an in-person audience?”

“Thought it...” Cole paused, not having an answer. “I thought it’d save time. Something about a dead kid?”

“Dead kitten. Seems a dozen people tried to get this cat out of a tree until some guy used a swimming pool net on a long aluminum pole. Looks like it touched a power line about the time it snagged the cat. Fried the kitty and shocked the shit out of the guy holding the pole. Anyway, follow it up, would ya? Natoma and 125th.”

“That’s it?”

“Yep, need filler. Nothing really happening today.” Brennan hung up.

A dead cat. Cole just stared, phone to his ear, dial tone humming. The movement of a copy clerk caught his eye. He knew he had to cover the story. That was the ache. Why didn’t he quit? The resounding echo was always, *To do what?*

Cole left his coat draped on the back of his swivel chair and stood looking over the tops of the cubicle walls; a sea of gray carpeted boxes filled with people doing God-knows-what? At the far end of the room stood three people deep in conversation. Next to them was the water cooler. Cole was not below eavesdropping. He made his way back to the trio.

“It’s stealing from the city, plain and simple,” groaned an Asian man in a Georgetown sweatshirt.

“Prove it, Lionel. How are you going to prove it? Facts, remember?” challenged a tall acne-scarred man Cole knew as Katz. Cole didn’t like him. Katz always sounded like he read too many Superman comics, and never realized that Jimmy Olsen wasn’t the hero.

Erica Sloan, whose bad haircut and wardrobe matched her writing style, chimed in. “Contractors can apply for low-cost city loans as long as they are either renovating existing buildings in low-income areas or building new low-income housing. It has been this way for years.

What's the big deal?" Cole had helped train her when she first came on the paper. She was smart and knew it, still finding news, just like he taught her.

Cole filled a cup with cold, filtered water. *No news here*, he thought as he turned to go back to his desk.

"Hi Mr. Sage, workin' on anything big?" Katz beamed when he caught sight of Cole.

"He really is Jimmy Olsen," Cole muttered.

"Carl."

"What?"

"My name is Carl, not Jimmy."

"Of course it is, sorry," returned Cole.

*Carl Katz, now why isn't he working on this story? Just think of the headline possibilities combined with his byline.* Cole actually chuckled to himself.

Clouds rolled in from the east. No chance of rain, but enough to cast a gray shadow on the day. Cole enjoyed the cool breeze on his face. His tie flapped in the wind as he walked to the car. Long ago he gave up tightening his ties. His uniform was pretty much the same year after year: Levi's, an oxford cloth, button-down collar shirt, and a Harris Tweed sports coat, with oval leather patches on the elbows. He owned three tweed sports coats. Gray for important meetings, interviews, or the rare occasion he was trying to impress someone. Dark brown for those more and more frequent dark days, when he didn't feel like leaving his apartment. And his personal favorite, camel-colored, for the times he really needed to feel like his old self. Today he wore the dark brown.

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Natoma Street was in the old part of the city, canopied with handsome old trees that lined streets, always keeping it cool and shady in summer. Cole always loved how the huge, old, ash trees loomed over the street, growing together and forming a massive green arch. Small houses, set deep on the lots, looked like little gingerbread houses. Ivy climbed and covered the chimneys. The lawns were all edged and mowed. Cole always wished he could have lived in a neighborhood just like the Montclare District.

As he turned up Natoma, a Community Service Officer flagged him down. "Sorry, sir, road's closed."

Cole showed the officer his press credentials and asked, "All this for a dead cat?"

"A bit more serious than that. Seems the old lady who owned the cat has taken the guy who killed it hostage. Says she's got a shotgun. Nobody can get to her."

"Where can I park?"

The officer pointed to the left side of the street behind an ambulance. "I guess that would be okay."

"Hey, who's in charge?" Cole yelled as he pulled away.

"Harris. Lieutenant Harris."

The small street was crammed with fire engines, ambulances, six police cruisers, and three or four navy blue, unmarked, Crown Victorias doing their best to look inconspicuous. The picture-perfect landscapes were strung with yellow police tape and lined with patrolmen. Neighbors from all over the district were pressing against the barricades and chatting about how nothing like this ever happened here before. Cole approached a bored-looking patrolman who was leaning against the back of a black-and-white, smoking.

“Sage with *The Sentinel*. What is going on? I heard some guy shocked a cat to death trying to get it out of a tree. What happened?”

“The lady who owned the cat came out with an old double-barrel shotgun while the paramedics were giving the guy who killed it the once-over. Started shouting about how he murdered her baby and how he had always hated her and this was his revenge. Seems she snapped.”

“Where’s Harris?”

“He’s at the yellow house with the hostage negotiator. Seems the old gal won’t answer the phone.” The patrolman motioned his thumb over his shoulder, indicating the direction of the house.

“Thanks.”

Cole made his way up the street with no regard for the barriers or tape. He always found that acting like you belong somewhere got you a lot further than asking questions.

In college, Cole heard Arlo Guthrie talking on the radio about a little-known verse of “This Land Is Your Land.” Arlo told the story of a time when his father, Woody, had been interviewed on the radio. The announcer asked about writing “This Land is Your Land,” and the usual bunch of shallow interview-type questions.

Woody had always told Arlo that this one special verse belonged to him and only he knew it. Woody would always sing it to Arlo when he felt down or got in trouble at school. To Arlo’s shock, Woody sang it on the air! He felt hurt and betrayed, but then overjoyed when Woody told the whole wide world that “that last verse belongs to my son, Arlo.” As Cole walked along dodging barricades and ducking under the police tape, he hummed *This Land* and sang that special verse in his head: *As I went walking, I saw a sign there, And on the sign, it said, No Trespassing. But on the other side, it didn’t say nothin’. That side was made for you and me.* Now that verse belonged to both Cole and Arlo.

“Hey, Sage,” Harris said without expression when Cole finally reached the house. “Lookin’ for blood?”

“No, actually a dead cat.”

“We’re a little beyond that now.”

“What’s the story on the old lady?”

“Isn’t any, really. Never had so much as a parking ticket. Just freaked when the guy killed her cat.” Harris motioned to the young man standing next to him. “Cole, this is Trevor Varney, negotiations specialist. Trev, this is Cole Sage of *The Sentinel*.”

“How’s it goin’?” Varney smiled.

“Any day above ground is a good day, I guess,” Cole replied.

Harris chuckled and turned to Varney. “Cole’s the eternal pessimist. He doesn’t even believe there’s a glass if you know what I mean.”

“Don’t believe everything you read.” Cole smiled.

“Especially in *The Sentinel*,” Harris teased.

“Yeah, especially that.”

“So, Mr. Varney, what happens if she won’t pick up the phone?” Cole asked.

“I’m just getting ready to approach the front of the house. Tom, I think it would be a good idea if we backed everybody up. Just enough to be out of direct sight of the front windows.”

“It’s your show,” Harris said calmly. Turning to a veteran officer on the tape line, Harris waved his arm at the growing crowd. “Okay, Sergeant, I want everybody back. Move the barriers to about that second house. Yeah, the green one,” he nodded, confirming the sergeant’s indication of a green two-story Tudor.

“How old is this woman? Is there a history with the hostage?”

Cole had been the best of friends with Harris for going on twenty years now. Still, he felt like he sounded as if he were conducting an interview.

"According to the hostage's wife, Mrs. Lemoore, her husband and Mrs. Clark have never got along. Clark's cat used the Lemoore's front flowerbed for a litter box. It's been a bone of contention for a long time. Mrs. Lemoore said her husband just got caught up in all the excitement of the cat in the tree and offered their pool net. The other neighbors love the guy. He's like the neighborhood fix-it man and barbeque king," Harris added as he watched the officers move the crowd and first set of barricades back. "Hey, watch the bushes! I don't want the city getting a bill to re-landscape these people's yards!"

"Where's the wife now?"

"That's her over there in the white shorts." Harris pointed towards a rather large woman standing on the lawn across the street from the Clark house.

"You know, Tom," Cole began, "there was a time you would have called her 'that fat broad.' Your newfound political correctness is a real tribute to the department's sensitivity training program." Cole slapped Harris on the back as he started toward the woman standing across the street.

"Well, you just keep *your* fat ass out of the way!" Harris chided.

Mrs. Lemoore was in her mid-to-late 40s. She was round around the middle, and her clothes did little to hide the fact. As he neared, Cole could see her eyes were red and puffy from crying. Her arms were tightly crossed across her large bust, and she was chewing on the nail of her right thumb.

"Mrs. Lemoore?" Cole said softly. "I'm Cole Sage of *The Sentinel*."

The woman turned her head and gave Cole a dazed glance, then went back to watching the house across the street. She didn't respond.

"The police know how to handle this kind of thing. It's going to be all right. What's your husband's first name?"

"Stan," she said in a whisper.

"I hear Stan's quite the man with a barbeque. Dry rub or sauce?"

"Dry Rub. Won't ever use sauce. That's for the table." She neither changed expression nor spoke with any inflection.

"Me too. Except chicken, of course."

"Why don't they do something!" She suddenly became animated and spread her arms out in the direction Harris was standing.

"They're getting ready to have a negotiator talk to Mrs. Clark. I just met him. Seems like he knows what he's doing." Cole had no idea if Varney knew what he was doing or not, but he wanted to comfort this woman. For some reason, he felt a connection to her. He had been on the scene of hundreds of murders, wrecks, fires, and hostage stand-offs, and seen and talked to parents, wives, husbands, and bystanders, but this was somehow different.

"What will he do?"

"Well, it seems Mrs. Clark—"

"Annie," she broke in.

"Annie...won't answer the phone. So, he will approach the front of the house and try to speak to her. He is unarmed and will use a bullhorn. He needs to get her talking. The more they can get her to do that, the better. It will help her calm down and see what she is doing is wrong and unnecessary. The guy's a pro. She's not a hardened criminal, just somebody who got too upset."

“Hope so. I’m-I’m so scared.”

“How ‘bout I stay here with you ‘til Stan comes out, Mrs. Lemoore?”

“Paula.” Again she spoke very softly.

“What?”

“Paula, my name is Paula. ‘Mrs. Lemoore’ always makes me feel so old. Mrs. Lemoore is my mother-in-law.” She seemed to smile slightly.

“I love the name Paula,” Cole said to the woman standing by him.

“I don’t know what I would do without Stan. I said something this morning I didn’t mean. I just want to say, ‘I’m sorry.’” She covered her face and sobbed.

“I bet Stan knows you didn’t mean it. He knows you love him. Let’s just sit down and wait this thing out.”

“Mrs. Clark,” the voice from the bullhorn seemed to bounce off every house on the block. “Mrs. Clark, I am Trevor Varney. Can I talk to you?” The young man with the bullhorn stood in the middle of the lawn and spread his arms at shoulder height and slowly turned around. “I’m unarmed. I just want to talk.” He put the bullhorn at his side and stood perfectly still.

In what seemed like a slow-motion scene from a Sam Peckinpah western, the front windows of the Clark house blew out. The head of Trevor Varney was blown open. Pieces of pink mass, blood, and hair rolled through the air and scattered across the lawn. Cole instinctively pushed Paula Lemoore to the ground shouting, “Stay down, stay down!” as she tried to struggle to her feet.

In the same moment, the body of a gray-haired woman in a blue flowered housedress flew out of the window and sprawled across the flowerbed below. A man in green shorts and a gray T-shirt appeared at the window, then jumped out and grabbed the shotgun the old woman was still clutching in her arms. He took the end of the barrel, spun around and threw the gun across the lawn, sending it sliding and scraping its way across the street, to bang against the curb on the other side.

“Stanley!” Paula Lemoore screamed. She ran across the street and into the arms of her husband running toward her.

The old woman lay motionless in the juniper bushes. From all directions, police ran into the yard. A half-circle of men in blue blocked Cole’s view of Annie Clark. An ambulance pulled up in front of the Clark house. Two paramedics hopped out, opened the back doors, and removed a gurney. Stan Lemoore, his arm around his wife’s shoulders, walked across the street to the curb in front of his house and sat down.

Cole crossed the street. The paramedics stood over the body of Trevor Varney, and the police got Annie Clark up and on her feet. The blast of the shotgun hit Varney just above the jawline; his handsome face was gone. The sight of the jagged flesh and shattered bone made Cole feel lightheaded.

“God, I never,” one of the paramedics began, then finished the thought to himself.

Cole approached the group of police officers. Annie Clark now faced one of the officers who was reading her rights to her. The other officers seemed to have lost interest in her and were turning their attention to the body on the lawn.

“Do you understand what I have just read to you, ma’am?” The officer, a tall red-haired policeman, whose name tag read “McClaron,” paused. “Do you understand what you have done?”

“Yes, but he shouldn’t have been on my lawn. Alex never let the children cut across our lawn, ever.”

The old woman, who moments before so brutally and violently ended the life of Trevor Varney, now stood small and frail. Her hair and the bun she wore on the back of her head had come undone. The rayon housedress that hung on her small frame was torn and exposed the yellowed fabric of her undergarments. Her shoulders were bowed, and the curving of osteoporosis gave her neck a strained, pulled look as she gazed up at the policeman. McClaron was in violation of department procedure but didn't have the heart to handcuff the old woman.

"Is there someone we can call for you, Mrs. Clark?" the officer asked gently.

"My Alex is gone, and Stanley Lemoore has killed Mr. Pip."

"Mr. Pip, ma'am?"

"My Persian."

"I see. But is there anyone, your children or other relatives, we can call for you?"

"No, we never could have any children. Alex, you know, meningitis in the Army, couldn't...you know..."

"Mrs. Clark, do you know what you have done here?" McClaron spoke as if he were talking to a young child.

"I was scolding Stanley from across the street for killing Mr. Pip, and he pushed me out of the window! Pushed me! I turned to see what the loud noise was and he pushed me right out the window! I want him arrested and in jail. Why is he gone? He pushed me. He attacked me in my own home."

"What about the gun, ma'am? What about shooting the gun?"

"Oh dear, I don't like guns. Alex always kept that nasty shotgun in the closet. But I never would touch it. He kept it loaded, you know," she said in almost a whisper. "Now that he's gone, I don't know what to do with it. Would you like to have it? I have no use for it."

McClaron acknowledged Cole's presence for the first time. In a stern expression, he shook his head, as if to say, "stay back." But in his eyes, there was a deep sadness. He turned to Annie Clark once again. "Mrs. Clark, we are going to have to take you down to the police station."

"By all means, I want to file a complaint. Imagine being pushed through a window. I am an old woman. I could have been hurt badly, maybe even killed. Why, of all the nerve. And now all this!" Turning to the police and paramedics gathered around Varney's body, she shouted in a high crackling voice, "You there, get off my lawn! Alex might come back soon, and he will be furious!"

"Can I get a female officer over here?" McClaron said into the microphone clipped to his shoulder epaulet.

"Officer, I want those people off my lawn."

"I'll see what I can do."

"Olson is on her way," the radio scratched.

"Let's wait over here, ma'am."

"Oh, I need to lock up and get my things. Oh! I must look a fright. I'll just go in and change."

"No, I'm afraid we don't have time for that. See, Officer Olson is here to give you a ride." McClaron pointed to the black-and-white that had just pulled into the driveway.

"I must leave a note. Alex will be worried if he returns and I'm gone."

"I'll stay to make sure he knows." Cole thought McClaron's voice seemed to crack.

"This her?" a raspy voice female officer asked.

"This is Mrs. Clark. Please transport her downtown." McClaron turned to Officer Olson and said something Cole couldn't hear. Then McClaron turned his attention back to the old woman. "Okay, Mrs. Clark, this is Officer Olson. She will take you downtown."

"A lady policeman? I never heard of such a thing! No wonder people think they can kill your cat and trample your lawn."

"Please come with me, ma'am," Olson barked.

"Remember what I said, Olson. Nice," McClaron snapped.

Officer Olson guided Mrs. Clark to the patrol car. Cole approached McClaron.

"I'm Cole Sage with *The Sentinel*."

"Harris's friend, right?"

"Right."

"I got nothin' to say," McClaron growled.

"What, you have a problem with Harris?"

"No, I got a problem with you. I hate newspaper people. They always get it wrong."

"You ever read my stuff?" Cole asked.

"Nope, why should I? It's all the same. Liberal blather." McClaron turned and walked away.

Cole chuckled and turned to cross back to where the Lemoores were sitting. The paramedics covered Varney's body with a white cloth, and the police taped off the area six feet in all directions around the body. Two detectives were watching as a police photographer took pictures of the shotgun laying in the gutter. About ten feet away, Paula and Stan Lemoore sat side by side on the curb, holding hands.

"How you doin', Stan?" Cole asked, reaching out to shake the man's hand.

"Fine, I guess," Stan said, reciprocating the shake.

"This gentleman stayed with me while you were..." Paula stopped and looked at Stan.

"My name is Cole Sage. I'm with *The Sentinel*. Do you want to talk about what happened?"

"Man, I don't *know* what happened. One minute I'm flat on my back, the next I'm looking down the barrels of a double-barrel twelve gauge. Annie said I killed Mr. Pip and she was going to show me how it feels. She made me go in the house and sit on the couch. I kept saying, 'Annie, put the gun down, you're just excited.' She said that Alex was going to be very angry when he got back. Alex died about five years ago. So I said, 'Annie, Alex is gone.' She started talking about all this stuff I did to her. It didn't make any sense. Hell, I mow her lawn for God's sake. This is crazy."

"What made her shoot?"

"She just kept talking about Alex this and Alex that, and how he didn't like people on the lawn. She was talking about how Mr. Pip was her only friend and how I had taken him from her. About then, the guy started talking on the megaphone thing. That really set her off. She started yelling, then she just whirled around and fired..." Stan's voice trailed off.

"And after that?" Cole prompted softly.

"She had her back to me, and the window was mostly gone, you know, so I just rushed her and gave her a real hard push. I had no idea she had shot the policeman until after I was outside."

Stan put his head down between his knees and started to wretch. Paula gently rubbed his back. "You'll be okay, honey, you're okay, breathe deep."

"Do you want the paramedics? Maybe they can give you something."

Paula looked up at Cole and smiled. "We'll be fine, thanks. Maybe you should go. Thanks for stickin' with me. You're a nice man, but we need to be alone now, okay?"



“Of course. You take care.” Cole looked down at her and smiled back. He stepped down into the street and started back to the police barrier.

“Hey,” Stan called to Cole, “don’t make Annie out to be crazy or anything. She’s a nice lady, just old and confused. I don’t think she knows what she did. All right?”

“I’ll do my best.”

The fire trucks were pulling out and the ambulances started their engines. Many of the police cars were already gone. Natoma Street almost looked back to normal. A young cop removed the yellow tape he’d strung up the hour before. Harris was on the police radio. Cole waved as he walked past him.

“Got a story?” Harris shouted.

“Think so. See you later.” Cole waved but didn’t slow his pace.

