

**PHILOSOPHER'S  
STONE**

**A NOVEL**

**BY**

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## Chapter One

When the madman came tapping, I was alone in the dark watching rain streak my office window. On the desk behind me lay a crumpled eviction notice and my account book.

What was the profit?

I had swiveled my chair toward the arched window because I was weary of the ledger. Dwindling twilight had mingled the tiny numbers into a single, dark spill whose bottom line remained unmistakable. When your sole livelihood is private detective and you stop looking for cases, refuse ones that find you, and forfeit ones you can't refuse, you end up broke. Maybe we *all* end broke. I couldn't name a rich private detective except Pinkerton, and he made it a business rather than a calling, so I wouldn't count him. Plus he died anyway. Dying is *dead* broke. I contemplated the ledger's balance sheet, assets minus liabilities, for which the final entry is always zero.

Sitting so long, I had grown cold and stiff. I needed to move my dead ass. I needed to *do* something. I stood, walked to the window, and fired a cigarette. Leaning against the window sill, cigarette drooping from my mouth, I watched the misty rain blur the squat San Dismas buildings. Orange County seemed to have slipped silently away, disappearing in fog and low, dark clouds. I lifted the sash to feel the rain, to feel *something*.

Four floors below crawled a slow procession of cars, headlights staring, windshield wipers blinking back the drizzle. Across Main, in front of a hole where a demolished bank once thrived, a line of black umbrellas waited for a bus. Nearby, black-coated men huddled in the boarded up entranceway of an abandoned department store. When the bus came, a lone figure scurried from the rear door, ducked his head against the rain, and darted through traffic toward shelter.

Wind whirled about, curling cigarette smoke into my eyes. Blinking, I coughed and cursed myself for surrendering to a dependence I had conquered until the day Ronnie died.

No, not *that* day. Until her *funeral*. Ten years ago. Exactly ten years ago. Armistice Day. A day like this one.

Dark.

Wet. Lonely.

Final.

Anniversaries resurrect memories. I felt mine pounding against their reliquary. I flipped my cigarette out the window and watched it arc downward to die in the rain. Lights winked on and off. The glistening streets reflected meaningless geometric patterns. Traffic hissed. Wind groaned in my ears. The weariness I felt had no name.

I retreated into shadows, opened the small refrigerator on the vanity counter, and withdrew the last Sapporo. I pried off the bottle-cap and swallowed two ... three ... four times. I knew I wouldn't feel it. I hadn't felt the others. I set the bottle on the counter top to light another cigarette with the ancient Zippo Jesus had carried. First PX run out of boot camp, we each had bought one, although mine was lost along the way, probably when I quit smoking. Jesus had cherished his like a Phi Beta Kappa key. I ran my thumb over the once gold eagle-globe-and-anchor insignia long since worn smooth and silvery.

I remembered his voice more clearly than his face anymore. I could easily imagine him bellyaching in his wheelchair about me sitting in the dark, hear him growl *pull your sorry shit together!* Having saved my life more than once, Jesus could say whatever he wanted. Suddenly I wanted to tell him the good-bye he never heard, the one I said over his broken body when the street gang who murdered Ronnie killed him in a drive-by.

Then I felt the rage again – molten, boiling, eternally hot like lava deep in the earth. I needed to kill the killers again. I needed it like water. Like air. I needed to chase them to hell and kill them one last time. Kill them so they would stay dead. My hands were shaking. I closed my eyes and took deep breaths until they steadied. I flicked the lighter and watched a ghostly coil of sooty smoke writhe above the yellow flame. I snapped shut the lighter and dropped it on the desk. The heat inside me subsided leaving, once more, solid stone.

Shadows distorted everything around me. I turned to a mirror over the vanity, but couldn't see myself, merely a hulking, big-shouldered shadow. When I drew on the cigarette, a face appeared, but it wasn't my face. The flaring ember stained my short, more-salt-than-pepper hair a clownish orange and inked deep wrinkles in orange outline. I tried to recall my real face and picked from memories the face in an old Polaroid – the smooth face of a clear-eyed, brown-haired, boy yet unburdened by a lifetime of unpaid debts. The Polaroid face was black and white, as unreal now as the ugly face in the mirror, but the ugly face was closer to the truth, because something in the young face, something more than youth, had withered like early laurel.

Leaving what?

The name on the door read Pete Pinel, Private Investigator. The words had meant something once, but now they rang hollow, as empty as an echo. I said them aloud. The syllables evaporated like sputters of steam from the leaky radiator beneath the open window. I hunched over the sink, splashed my face, and listened to water gurgle down the drain. I wiped my face on my

shirt sleeve, swallowed the last of the beer, and dropped the bottle in a wastebasket where it clattered against the other dead soldiers. I sat back down, facing the ledger.

So.

I drew the .45 from my shoulder holster, unsure why I wanted to hold it. It wasn't the one I had used in Nam, but it was kin. In the dark it looked distorted, unfamiliar, like my face in the mirror. The smell, however, was unmistakable; the weight, the balance. A grip of warm wood. A barrel of cold steel. Heavy, wood-handled steel. Like an ax. Like a scythe. I imagined the sound it would make racking a round, the precise, metallic snicker-snack of machined parts moving with purpose. I hefted it in my hand and judged that it was heavier than the sum of its metal and wood parts. The excess was a ghost in the machine, an imp, a demon that I had summoned many times, one to whom I had written IOU's. How heavy that haunted tool must have felt when I pressed it into Ronnie's frail hand her last, hopeless night in the hospital as she lay entangled in wires and tubes, drowning in waves of pain and fear.

I offered her the choice I couldn't make *for* her despite her pleas.

She chose to wait.

Wait holding my hand instead of the scythe.

That I now held.

In my empty hand.

So.

A bell sounded. Someone had entered the outer office from the hallway. Certainly not a client, I thought, flicking the crumpled eviction notice with a finger.

A collector maybe?

I shrugged, holstered the .45, and said to myself, *the bill tolls for thee*.

It wasn't particularly funny, so maybe something else was funny, because I thought I felt a slight smile. And for the life of me, I couldn't remember the *last* time I had smiled.

## Chapter Two

I flung open the door to the waiting room. Startled, a white-haired, old man – older than me – stumbled backwards, hands raised as if to protect his head. He was barefoot and wore a grungy, buttonless peacoat over hospital pajamas. The pajamas were a particularly bad sign.

"They were waiting," he croaked.

"I hate when that happens."

He peered into the dark office. At one time he had been tall, probably beefy, but now he stood stoop-shouldered, looking stick-like and collapsed, eaten from the inside. His sunken face was dead-carp pale, but his wide, electric-blue eyes glistened. They were madman eyes, crackling with energy, charged by a dynamo of secret knowledge of the one true answer to the only big question. He pushed past me, surprisingly strong, and dashed to the window.

"They're gone!" he said.

"They always are," I replied, following him inside. I tugged the desk lamp chain and parked in my swivel chair so I could face him. "Who's gone?"

"The men looking for me, you imbecile!"

"Oh, them ... Say, come away from the window, okay?"

"Three men in black coats. They were right there."

"The ones waiting for the bus?"

"They're gone now!"

"No accounting for *that* now, is there?"

"My God! I imagined you'd have your wits about you."

"C'mon, man, no offense, but that open window makes me nervous.

Take a seat, okay?"

"How would they know? I ... I must have said something."

"Loose lips, sink ships.

He bounded to the door, cracked it, and peeked into the waiting room. Slamming the door, he flipped the deadbolt. "I gave her the address from a payphone. They couldn't know ... unless – " He stopped to examine himself, pawing at the pajamas.

"Maybe the transmitter is in your head," I said. "Maybe they can read your thoughts."

He froze as if considering the idea.

"Look, pal, you waltz in here wearing Camino by the Sea pajamas under a stolen coat. Barefoot."

He looked down at his feet, purple from the cold.

"Camino is the Ritz-Carleton of ocean-view loony bins. You either ran or wandered away. Trust me. Whatever you *think* is happening has another explanation."

"Don't condescend you ignorant buffoon! I'm a physician."

"Sorry, Doc, but you're a pill or two short of healing yourself. What's your name?"

He fell silent in a blankly eerie way – as if his thoughts had suddenly vanished. I waited.

His head dropped and he whispered, "Forgive him for he knows not what he does."

Nothing to say to that, I waited some more.

His head snapped up. The gleam was back. "Do you believe in God?"

"No," I said.

"Neither do I. Only Hell ... I found it, you know?"

"Found what? Forgiveness or Hell?"

"Both. The philosopher's stone."

"So you're an alchemist," I said, remembering from some long-ago college class the medieval notion of a magic catalyst. "You turn lead to gold, do you?"

He pulled a small, green vial from his coat pocket and placed it on the desk blotter. "And back ... to lead," he sighed. He sank into a chair, his arms dangling loosely at his sides.

I unscrewed the vial's black plastic lid, looked inside, and upended a single, rock-candy crystal into my palm. I licked my finger, touched it to the crystal, and rubbed the finger across my gum. The electrical tingle was unmistakable.

I dropped the rock back into the vial, replaced the cap, and wiped my finger on my pants.

"You found cocaine," I said. "Only they already had it."

"It's the philosopher's stone," he said flatly, staring at the floor.

"Sure, sure, lead to gold. Ask Freud or Sherlock Holmes. I wish it worked, pal."

"I am the future!" he erupted, throwing his arms toward heaven like Nixon leaving the White House. His exposed wrists were scraped raw and bruised. Camino by the Sea Hospital might occasionally use restraints, but they would be soft restraints, Gucci or Prada restraints.

Not handcuffs.

"The future ain't what it used to be. Who cuffed you?"

"Our common past ..." His eyes were glinting again. "Mr. Pinel."

Knowing my name was easily explained. It was lettered on the office door. On the other hand, some remote crossing of paths and a glimmer of deliberation in his madness might have led him to me. I figured to find out, because he stood and craned forward. Sparks were flying in his eyes. He was fully charged and about to shock me with his one, true answer to the only important question.

He put his lips directly against my ear and whispered.

"You only *think* you know what happened to Veronica."

It was a freeze-frame moment – a moment when gaping pupils make the world razor-sharp and motionless. Every sound was distinct because the same blast of adrenalin that cleared my vision stopped my breathing and tensed my eardrums – hyper-acusis the docs called it in Nam. I seemed to be watching myself move as if in some jerky, stop-motion film sequence – I'm springing from my chair, I'm collaring the madman, I'm dragging him toward the door – because the name he'd put in my ear meant someone *might* be coming for him, someone who'd used cuffs and drugs on him, someone from whom I wanted the madman absolutely safe until he told me what I didn't know.

"We're out of here," I was saying when the waiting room door bell sounded amid a clamor of feet. The inner door crashed open wrenching the bolt from the doorjamb in an explosion of raw, yellow splinters. A gunshot shattered the window behind me. The madman shook off my grip. I dove behind the desk, ripping the .45 from the shoulder holster. Heavy feet scrambled into the room. A giant in a ski-mask rounded the corner of the desk, but skidded when he saw me pulling the Colt.

"Gun!" he shouted, snap-kicking as I raised to fire, knocking the automatic from my fist.

I grabbed his outstretched leg, wrenched him off his feet, then lodged my shoulders in the desk recess, lurched upward, and drove forward like a tank. A gun roared and I felt slugs bite into the desk. I collided with something that wasn't a wall and dumped the desk on it. I spun to see one masked gunman scabbling to his feet and another standing over the whimpering old man.

*Not in my Goddamn office you don't!*

Charging bull-headed, I strained to grab anything that I could squeeze, crush, or tear apart. Ten years earlier I *might* have made it, but I was older, slower, and definitely dumber, because the one with the gun simply leveled and fired, dead-bang. A hot, yellow blast slammed into my head, spun me around, and pitched me face down into a throw rug. My empty fingers pumped spasmodically as if squeezing a trigger. My nerves and muscles were all short-circuiting, leaving me flopping like some goddamn beached grunion while a black wave crashed over me, dragging me away in a dizzy, dark, gut twisting vortex.

The voices went last.

"You can't take what I don't have!" I heard the madman screeching. "I don't know anymore. I don't – " His voice was suddenly muffled as if someone had stuffed a sock in his mouth.

"Give him the needle before he chokes. And find the rock. If it's not on him, tear the place apart."

"How 'bout this one?"

I felt a toe in my ribs as darkness yielded to oblivion.

"Fucking head shot. He's done."

## Chapter Three

Something existed.

Then awareness existed.

Next came awareness of awareness, of something being aware.

Awareness of me.

Then, as always, came fear.

I named the fear to control it. It was the wide-eyed-in-the-dark, scream-cramped-inside-fear of a four-year old boy caught between closing bedroom walls; the wheezing, air-hungered fear of a teen-aged Marine pursued through a maze of Saigon shacks; the water-in-the-lungs fear I felt executing Ronnie's murderer as the roiling cistern rose to drown us both; the hopeless, death-bed fear I felt holding Ronnie's hand as she let go; the long goodbye fear of a solitary old man enduring an endless, arctic night.

But words and names failed – all mere shadows of the fear *without* object, without name. Intrinsic fear. Fear from the first. Fear in the nucleus of the egg, the sperm. Original fear from original sin. Fear that urges movement toward light. Fear that urges flight from light. Fear of nothing. Fear of everything. Fear of not being. Fear of *being*.

And finally, as always, came a choice, or what seemed like a choice, a lucid-dream moment when I chose between consciousness and nothing. Although this time – altogether different – I heard a *voice* urging me to choose, and it wasn't me, not my own voice the way I heard myself in my head. It was an *other*.

It was a woman.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Stop squirming! Let me help you."

Darkness receded with a roar, spitting me out again, leaving me stranded in the light of the overturned desk lamp. Black shadows loomed against the wall. My arm flailed for the .45.

"Stop it!"

My legs kicked. My eyes crossed and re-crossed, finally fixing on a kneeling woman who had rolled me onto my side, resting my chest over her knees to keep me from choking. Blood stained the skirt of her tweedy business suit.

Jerking away, I pushed up with one arm. My thoughts were like jumbled puzzle pieces. I tried to pull the woman into the picture as friend or

foe and settled for no immediate threat. My hand found a throbbing spot on my left temple where the hair was wet and matted.

"You've been shot," she said.

Probing the tender spot with my finger seemed to pound a spike through my head. "I was there, lady."

"Leave that alone!" she said, standing and rushing to the sink. She yanked free a handful of paper towels from a dispenser and knelt back down.

"It looks worse than it is. Your skull *might* be fractured, but the bullet grazed your scalp."

"What are you? A nurse?"

"I'm a *doctor*," she said, jamming the wadded towels against my bleeding head.

"Hey, not so hard! It wasn't an insult."

"Hold still."

"You're hurting me!"

"Just hold still."

She spoke without accent, although her voice tolled with the musical quality peculiar to English speakers whose native tongues are tonal languages wherein sound means as much as syllable. The music had charms and her hands felt competent.

I surrendered. *Temporarily*.

If the stodgy suit was supposed to disguise how exotic she looked, it failed. Her eyes were *almost* almond-shaped, but blue – a brilliant, not-of-this-world, sapphire blue in the way sapphires were once said to reflect the sky. Her hair was Asian – silken, straight, absolutely black – but her body was runway-model tall and slender, her face hungry-looking with a wide mouth, narrow nose, and full lips. Her skin, unlike that of any earthly race, was the shade of coffee with just the right amount of cream.

"No docs rent in this building. Who are you?" I grunted.

"Dr. Nguyen." She peeled back the toweling paper, inspected, then pressed harder.

"Nguyen?" The sound was bitter in my mouth. "*Quang dho?*"

She stiffened.

"Which *side*? I was a child at the time. I was on my mother's side. As you might discern from my face, *she* was on the Americans' side. When the Americans abandoned Saigon, we were on the Communists' side. But our post-war experience was ... how shall I say it? Unpleasant. When I was fourteen, my mother died, leaving me on *my* side. And because you are either constitutionally stupid or bullet-addled, may I point out that I appear to be on *your* side."

"Some of us still have scars," I said.

"*All* of us still have scars."

"And you don't make it to fifty-eight without trusting your instincts, Miss Nguyen."

"Doctor Nguyen."

"Well, Doc ... whoever finds the body is suspect number one. And I still don't know what you're doing here."

"So I'm a suspect?"

"Minus the question mark."

"Mr. Pinel – that's you, correct? Pinel Investigations? – a friend asked me to meet him here."

"White hair. Mid-seventies. 6-2, but all bones."

"Where is he?"

"You just missed him. Why here?"

"I've no idea."

"This friend ... he escaped from Camino by the Sea?"

She hesitated, then nodded. "He left a breathless message on my answering machine. I came immediately, found the door open, and saw you on the floor."

I stood, but the room dropped from beneath me like a trap door. I sank to one knee.

"You can't stand yet."

"I *think* I can, I *think* I can," I said, shaking off her hand to try again, I held the vertical and started poking through upset furniture and scattered files.

"What are you looking for?"

"A rock."

She said nothing, as if she were practiced at waiting for clues to mysterious statements. When it finally penetrated my woozy consciousness that the filing cabinets were untouched, I righted a chair and plopped back down, almost missing the seat.

"They got it," I said. "So ... who's your friend?"

"Did ... did he shoot you?"

"Three men in ski-masks broke in. They shot me."

"Why?"

"Well, for starters, I was trying to shoot them. One of them said find the rock. Does that mean anything to you?"

She shook her head.

"They doped your pal and took him away. Are you going to tell me his name?"

"Walter Kling."

"Rings no bells with me," I said, but paused. "Wait a minute. The Nobel Prize Kling?"

"The subconscious is a powerful tool. You knew but didn't know you knew."

"Oh, my God! You're not a doctor, you're a shrink!"

"Are there any prejudices you have not acquired, Mr. Pinel? I'm a medical doctor whose specialty is psychiatry."

"Wasn't Kling like the dean or something at UC San Dismas?"  
"Until last year Dr. Kling was Chairman of the Psychiatry Department. He's on medical leave."  
Nguyen slid a chair beside me. She sat to take my pulse. Her hands were soft.  
"You're tachycardic," she said.  
I flicked her hand away again.  
"Who might want to kidnap him?" I said.  
"No one."  
"Try again. Big honcho shrink means powerful patients. Kling knows where bodies are buried."  
"Walter was a research scientist, not a clinical psychiatrist."  
"No patients? Okay, what was he researching?"  
"Facilitated neurotransmission."  
"And this facilitated whatever is lucrative, right?"  
"Dr. Kling concerned himself with basic science, not applications."  
"Downstream from every Einstein is an Oppenheimer who is into applications?"  
"Well ... his work may lead to new treatments for mental illness."  
"Drugs?"  
"Pharmaceuticals, yes."  
"Ka-ching!"  
"That's insulting."  
"Look, Kling may be a saint, but if he's sitting on a gold mine, he's a potential mark. Follow the money – detective school 101."  
"I would hardly describe Walter's work as a gold mine." She paused, considering her words. "He ... consulted. Grants and fees funded his work." When I said nothing, she added. "That's the way it's done!"  
"Time out of mind," I said. I bent to grab the phone lying on the floor. The floor began to waver like heat shimmer. Nguyen caught my shoulder.  
"You need an MRI, Mr. Pinel."  
"If I leave here without calling the cops, it better be for the morgue," I said, punching 9-1-1.  
I gave the operator a quick rundown, insisting that an ambulance was unnecessary as was staying on the line. Easing myself to my feet, I retrieved my .45. I removed the PI license and CCW permit from my wallet and placed them on the overturned desk beneath the gun.  
"Let's park our chairs by the window," I said. "Cops get skittish over other peoples guns."  
"I am quite familiar with the proclivities of policemen," she said coldly. I started to ask why, when a thought hit me.  
"One of the gunmen is a cop, I think. Or was. When he saw my .45, his gut reaction was to yell gun. Alert his partners. It's a cop thing." We scooted

our chairs and sat again. "Tell me more about Kling. He was a prisoner at Camino?"

"*Please*, Mr. Pinel ... Walter is completely unable to care for himself. He's an involuntary patient."

"A prisoner."

"The court appointed me his legal guardian. I committed him for treatment. I see private patients there myself."

"You're not his doctor then?"

"That would be inappropriate. He's a ... colleague."

"*More* than a colleague?"

She looked away.

"How inappropriate. Wasn't he too old for you?"

"Yes, Mr. Pinel. Just about *your* age when I met him."

I laughed. "You're a counterpuncher, Doc. I thought shrinks were supposed to go with the flow."

"You're not my patient, Mr. Pinel. And you *are* annoying." She took a deep breath and continued. "Walter recruited me to San Dismas from Stanford twelve years ago. I was pursuing a research career then. He was my ... mentor."

"The mentoring ended when he got sick?"

"I lost interest in research a long time ago, Mr. Pinel, but I'm always there for Walter."

I watched her for a moment, nodding slowly. "So, what's his problem?"

She spread her hands. "It remains a mystery."

"Detectives don't like mysteries."

"Neither do doctors. Behaviorally, he suffers from a progressive dementia."

"Like Alzheimer's?"

"Yes, *like* that, but the onset was acute. More like a stroke, although structurally his brain is intact."

"So he suddenly went nuts."

"No, Mr. Pinel. Idiopathic psychosis occurs in a *functional* matrix."

"I was about to point that out," I said.

She smiled. "*Nuts* retain their intellect – memory, vocabulary, skills. Walter's higher cognitive functions disappeared overnight leaving him hopelessly incompetent."

"Incompetent ... " I pondered it for a moment. "As in retarded?"

"Broadly, yes. More precisely, he's demented. Memory, judgment, language, reason ... irreversibly gone."

"That's his doctor's opinion?"

"Of course, but I've consulted other experts, and I've examined the data myself. Every professional is of the same mind."

"You don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows." I said, feeling clever.

She looked puzzled.  
Good. I was glad.