



# CITY OF SERPENTS

**chuck freadhoff**

## CHAPTER 1

“There’s nothing to be afraid of, sweetheart,” Rick said, sweeping his daughter off the street and into his arms. “No one’s going to hurt you.”

But his words sounded hollow even to him and he wondered how badly he’d blundered. Beside him, his wife, Kelly, got a grim look on her face and Rick took her hand.

He sensed the protesters’ mood — the tension on the steps of the Los Angeles City Hall palpable even a block away — and wished he could turn back. The sharp whistles, the bullhorn, the placards, and the sheer number of protesters surprised him.

The light of a TV camera, bright even in the midmorning sun, swept across the crowd and they lifted their placards, chanting in unison, “*People not profits! Hell no, we won’t go!*”

“You go on,” Kelly said, “I’ll meet you with Sara later.”

The light changed, the others brushing by on both sides. It wasn’t too late, Rick thought. He could still send Kelly home with Sara, scurry in a back door.

But they’d groomed themselves for this — Rick in his best pinstripe, Kelly in a black dress that showed her at her blond best, Sara in pigtails and pink. Kelly had even worn the necklace that had belonged to his grandmother — a simple pearl on a gold chain — as a good luck charm. He’d be damned if he’d let some noise take him down.

Rick stepped off the curb, moving into the intersection. He glanced back at Kelly, still on the sidewalk.

“All this for Johns and Development One?” she asked. He read the pleading in her eyes.

“No, not for them. For us,” Rick said. “This is our whole future right here. I’ve worked too hard, put too much into this to give up now.”

Kelly pointed behind him. Rick looked over his shoulder. One of the protesters was waving a sign with a caricature of him on it, a demon.

Sara clung to his shirt, burying her face in the crook of his arm.

“It’s okay, sweetheart,” he said again. “They can’t hurt you.” Knowing the words for the lie they were, not a policeman in sight.

“Let’s just make it to the mayor’s office,” he said, and added, “please.”

Kelly’s shoulders dropped. She’d go this last mile for him, but Rick knew in his heart it really was the last mile. He’d pushed her hard, way past what was reasonable. Any more and their marriage would shatter.

She came across the intersection, hooked her arm in his, and together, they walked toward the chanting crowd, a reasonable man with a charming family.

“They make me out to be some kind of monster, I can’t just put my tail between my legs and run. Don’t you see?” Rick asked.

The public, especially the city council and the mayor, had to see he wasn’t the demon Paula Cantor and her crowd claimed he was. He wasn’t just driven by money, but was giving something back, Rick told himself.

He rolled his shoulders, feeling the growing heat. The day had started hot, eighty degrees before nine o’clock, and the sidewalk burned through his shoes. Just now he liked the heat. He’d sparred a few rounds with a young fighter the night before and the heat warmed his sore muscles.

Long ago, he’d learned in boxing it wasn’t the biggest, quickest, or even the strongest fighter who won. The guy who controlled the ring won, and by walking right through Cantor’s crowd, he’d be sending a clear message about who controlled this ring now.

All he had to do was finish it.

Sara squirmed in his arms, reached for her mother and Kelly took her. They started again, approaching the crowd. They hadn’t been seen yet but would be in a few seconds. In for a penny, in for a pound, Rick thought. But it wasn’t a penny. It was a million dollars, maybe a lot more.

Rick glanced at Kelly. Alarm filled her eyes, she clutched Sara closer to her.

A man Rick recognized from the countless hearings he’d attended broke away from the group. Rick didn’t know his name, just thought of him as “Hairball.” He was well over six feet and at least two hundred pounds, his matted black body hair always visible above the loose neck of his T-shirt or where his worn-thin shirts strained at the buttons. He lived

at the Bradford, Rick knew — a disabled veteran or something.

“That’s him, here comes the son-of-a-bitch,” Hairball yelled and the protesters flowed down the sidewalk. The camera lights swung in Rick’s direction, forcing him to blink.

A cop came through the door of City Hall, another behind him. The crowd was parting, lining both sides of the sidewalk. The shouts were louder now. The cameraman was walking backward, catching them.

Someone started yelling Rick’s name and the crowd picked it up. “*Hell no, Moreno.*”

He heard Kelly gasp. “Oh my God.”

Hairball rushed at them, screaming something, his words unintelligible. Rick whirled, turned his back to the man, and tried to step in front of Kelly.

He saw something wet hit her face and looked over his shoulder. Saliva glistened on Hairball’s chin. Rick realized the man had spit on Kelly. He turned and cocked his right arm, ready to throw an uppercut into Hairball’s soft belly, land a jab to his kidney and a hard right into the back of his neck. But a cop was there, grabbed his arm, and spun him sideways.

Rick jerked away, ready to attack again, but saw the fear and disgust in Kelly’s eyes and stopped.

A gasp came from the crowd and he turned. Hairball was on the sidewalk. Two cops had him down. Two more uniforms ran from somewhere and the crowd went silent.

Rick’s breath came in gulps, and Kelly’s fingers dug into his arm. Sara cried. The protesters moved, letting Rick and Kelly and Sara walk to the door. But if Hairball’s actions had dismayed or disgusted them, it didn’t show in their faces, their eyes were still filled with animosity as Rick and his family passed.

Inside City Hall, Rick dropped his briefcase on the security scanner belt and pulled his handkerchief from his back pocket. He took Sara from Kelly and gently wiped the spit from Kelly’s cheek. She stared blankly ahead.

“Who are those people?” Her voice was dry and tight.

“Some of them live at the Bradford, but others . . . .” He realized she wasn’t expecting an answer. “I don’t know.”

They passed through the security scanner and walked to the elevator banks where they stood silently. Sara reached for her mother and Kelly took her. The accusing look Sara gave him hurt him deeply.

Three demonstrators, women in red T-shirts with white letters — *Save the Bradford Hotel* — passed through the scanner and came toward them.

The elevator bell rang and the doors slid open. Kelly stepped in, holding Sara. Rick turned and looked at the women. They were in their sixties, their faces tan. They wore dark slacks and sandals and their T-shirts looked brand-new. He glanced behind them for Paula Cantor but didn't see her.

He stepped into the elevator, turned and glared at the women. They stopped abruptly. The doors slid closed.

Rick led Kelly and Sara from the elevator to the domed rotunda at the center of city hall. He turned down the hall to the mayor's office but Sara's voice, somehow small and distant, stopped him.

"Mommy, I want to go home."

Rick turned. Kelly was smoothing Sara's hair. She hadn't followed him down the corridor. Everything he'd done this morning, he'd done wrong.

"Okay, sweetheart, we'll go home," Kelly said. She glanced back toward the elevator bank then at Rick. "We're done here," she said.

"There's another door," he said, and they followed him out to the street where he flagged a cab.

Kelly paused at the open taxi door. Rick leaned past her, kissing Sara. "I love you, sweetheart."

"I love you too, Daddy."

To Kelly, he said, "I'm sorry. I didn't expect this."

Kelly's eyes were fixed on something in the distance, almost as if he were not there. "I don't care about the money anymore, Rick," she said. "It's not worth it."

Rick tried to think of something to say. *It'll be over tomorrow?* No.

She looked at him, her eyes blank. "You'll be late for the mayor." She straightened his tie, turned to the cab, and looked back at him.

"Do you have any money?"

Rick pulled out his wallet and opened it. He had a ten, a five, and three ones. He handed the money to her. "Will this be enough?"

She took the cash without counting it and shrugged. "I hope so," she said and ducked into the taxi.

Rick watched until the cab was half a block away and wondered how he'd pay his own parking now. He almost smiled at the irony of it. A few days and one city council vote away from being a millionaire and he was stone cold broke: credit cards maxed, a month behind in the mortgage, and literally not a dime in his pocket. He had to make sure the vote went his way.

He turned and hurried back up the wide marble steps to City Hall.

## CHAPTER 2

Thomas Petsky, Development One's chief operations officer, slowed outside the heavy wooden door to Jeffrey Johns's office. Johns had told him never to come in without knocking and waiting for a reply. This time, though, Petsky went straight in. Johns looked up from his desk.

"Turn on the TV. Channel five," Petsky said. "You've got to see this."

Johns flicked a remote toward a flat screen on the wall. An image of Rick, Kelly, and Sara struggling through the people in front of City Hall filled the TV. Moments later a man burst out of the crowd, screaming and spitting on Kelly. The camera zoomed in on the cops wrestling the man to the cement then shifted its focus to Kelly. She looked shell-shocked. Sara was crying in her arms. The spit glistened on her cheek.

"What the hell?" Johns said. He looked at Petsky. "He clear this with you?"

"No. I'm telling you he's a loose cannon, a liability."

Johns held up a finger, silencing Petsky, and nodded to the TV where the reporter, a pretty young woman with blond hair to her shoulders, turned to the camera.

"The long-simmering dispute over the future of the Bradford Hotel has finally reached a boiling point. Demonstrators trying to save the low-income residence facility gathered in front of City Hall this morning to protest the hotel's possible conversion to high-end condos. The L.A. City Council will make its final decision tomorrow whether to give Development One the waiver it needs. In exchange for the waiver, Development One has promised to build three hundred low-income housing units in East L.A. Rick Moreno seen here going into City Hall moments ago . . ." the reporter

paused and images of the man bursting from the chanting crowd and spitting on Kelly again filled the screen, followed immediately by footage of Rick cocking his arm and the cops restraining him “. . . is the project manager for Development One. It’s his job to win the council’s approval. But winning tomorrow’s vote won’t be easy. The Save the Hotel coalition is led by veteran Westside activist Paula Cantor, who has stopped more than one development dead in its tracks.”

The reporter paused and glanced over her shoulder at the protestors chanting in unison: “People not profits. People not profits.”

She looked back to the camera. “Sources tell me that the decision will be close. The council is evenly divided with Councilman Tony Campos holding the deciding vote. So far, Campos has been mum on how he’s leaning. They’ll vote tomorrow. Stay tuned. Reporting live from City Hall, this is Alice Campbell . . . .”

Johns turned off the TV, stood, and looked out the windows on the north wall. Petsky followed his gaze past Westwood, beyond the UCLA campus to the multimillion-dollar homes snuggled into the Santa Monica Mountains. The office was quiet and dimly lit; the traffic noise from Wilshire Boulevard thirty floors below and sunlight were sealed out by the thick, tinted glass. Petsky glanced around the room, searching for the bug detectors. He didn’t see them, but knew they were there — so sensitive they’d pick up a tape recorder in your pocket if it were running.

Johns turned away from the windows.

“Perhaps you’re right. It may have been an error in judgment on my part to hire Moreno. But the question is, what do we do from here?”

“Are you really going to give him the stock options after this screw up?”

“There are a few weeks between the vote and when we go public. A lot of things can happen.” Johns held Petsky’s eyes and Petsky nodded.

The phone buzzed. Johns stepped to the desk and hit the button.

“Hello, Mr. Johns, it’s Jim Riley. I understand Thomas Petsky is in your office.”

“Yes, I’m here,” Petsky said and moved closer. He’d brought Riley, another Desert Storm vet, with him to Development One and promoted him to chief information officer and head of security. It was all the same, military or civilian, Petsky knew. You needed someone to be your eyes and ears.

“You told me to watch Brown and Sons.”

“Yes,” Petsky said. Brown and Sons were allies, the investment bank-

ers taking Development One public. But Petsky had long understood that you spy on your friends as well as your enemies. Standard procedure. Trust no one.

“My, ah . . . contact at Brown and Sons tells me there may be a hiccup.”

“What?” Petsky said.

“They’re taking a closer look at Olsen Consulting, examining the lawsuits. They’re worried there might be something.”

Johns leaned forward, hit the mute button, and looked at Petsky. “Are we in any danger here?”

“No,” Petsky said.

“You sure?”

“Yes.”

Johns punched the mute button again and nodded to Petsky.

“Thank you,” Petsky said. “Keep me informed.” The line went dead and Petsky turned to Johns.

“Make sure nothing goes wrong,” Johns said.

“Of course.”

“Oh, and make contact with that TV reporter.” He gestured to the flat screen.

“Are you sure?” Had Johns lost his mind? The last thing they needed was more publicity.

“Yes, I’m sure. She could prove useful further down the line.”

## CHAPTER 3

Rick waited until a clerk came out of the employee entrance then ducked into the building before the door closed. He crossed the rotunda and moments later stepped into the office of the mayor of Los Angeles, Raul Peña.

The receptionist told him that Mayor Peña was running late and pointed to several upholstered chairs with curved legs against the wall. He picked a chair with a direct view of the door to Peña's office and leaned his head against the wall.

Maybe Kelly was right. Maybe he was paying too high a price. They'd fought about it again last night, their voices loud, their words tense and angry. She'd accused him of selling out, of letting Johns use him, of being a toady. Her words had stung and he'd fired back, asking her who the hell was paying all the bills? They both worked for Development One, he reminded her. Now, though, he had to admit there was some truth to what she said. He closed his eyes and saw Hairball coming out of the crowd and spitting on Kelly. Unconsciously he touched his cheek. Should he have listened to her more closely?

But Kelly didn't know what it was like to grow up poor, to do without, to see your parents working two jobs and squeezing every nickel, to see your friends get sucked into a gang or be lured by the easy, plentiful money that dealing offered. She didn't know what it was like to take six years to get a degree from a state school because you had to work nights and weekends to make the tuition. She'd breezed through an expensive private school.

No, she didn't know what it was like. Still, in many ways Kelly knew

Johns better than he ever would. She'd grown up surrounded by men like him. And she didn't trust him. Maybe, Rick thought, he needed to listen to her more carefully.

Rick heard the mayor laugh and a moment later a petite woman in her late forties wearing a beige dress and white patent leather pumps came out of his office. Rick's stomach tightened. He stood up.

"Mrs. Cantor," he said and rolled his shoulders, seeing the spit on Kelly's face. "I assumed you'd be out front with the others."

"I had business here." She smiled at Peña standing in the doorway. She turned to go but Rick stepped in front of her.

"You leave my family out of this. That clear?"

"You have a lot of nerve talking about families," she said and turned to Peña. "Thank you again, Mr. Mayor."

Peña was thin, handsome and elegantly dressed. His nails were manicured and his haircut probably cost more than Rick's shoes. He smiled at Cantor, confident, charming. He motioned to Rick. The smile was gone.

"You want to come in now, Mr. Moreno?"

Rick glared at Cantor then stepped aside. Cantor strode past him and he picked up his briefcase and followed Peña into his office.

Peña lowered himself into a high-backed chair behind his desk, thanked Rick for coming.

"You have a problem."

"Problem?" Rick noticed Peña didn't say "we."

"Cantor tells me a Cal State chemistry professor found dangerous levels of benzene and methane at the Casa Alegre site, maybe from old oil wells. If you can't build Casa Alegre, you're not getting the waiver."

"We tested the soil. It was all negative," Rick said. He tried to remember the environmental impact report Olsen Consulting had written. What had it said about chemicals in the soil? He probably should have read it more carefully, but Petsky had assured him everything was fine.

"Well, maybe I'm extra sensitive because I grew up a few blocks from there and will never forget it."

Rick stifled a flash of anger. He was willing to bet that Peña hadn't been to East L.A. except to campaign in ten years. He thought of his own trips to K & M Market, the tiny corner grocery so old its name had almost faded into the ancient bricks above the narrow doorway. He stopped every week to buy his mother a lottery ticket and catch up on the local gossip. But not Peña; he wasn't hanging out with the homeboys these days, he was living large in Hancock Park.

“Mr. Mayor, when Development One is finished with Casa Alegre, three hundred low-income families will have brand-new homes. Nicer than I had back —”

“Back when you were going by Ricardo instead of Rick?” Peña said.

Rick could still hear the crowd chanting and feel Kelly’s fingers digging into his arm. A familiar blend of rage and impotence filled him and he saw himself flying across the kitchen as his father backhanded him, turned, and slapped his mother again.

He moved within a few inches of Peña’s desk.

“It was my idea to put that low-income housing there. So don’t tell me I’m not giving back.”

“Well, I haven’t made up my mind,” he said. “I want that housing, but I don’t want women having two-headed babies either.”

“Neither do I, Your Honor. But there’s no problem here.”

“There better not be,” Peña said. He turned away and opened his laptop. The meeting was over.

“Thank you for your time, Mr. Mayor.” Rick went to the door and was reaching for the knob when Peña spoke.

“Hey, Ricardo.” Rick turned. “You’re sure about your environmental report?” Peña said.

Rick forced a smile and gave the only answer possible. “Absolutely, Mr. Mayor. Absolutely.”