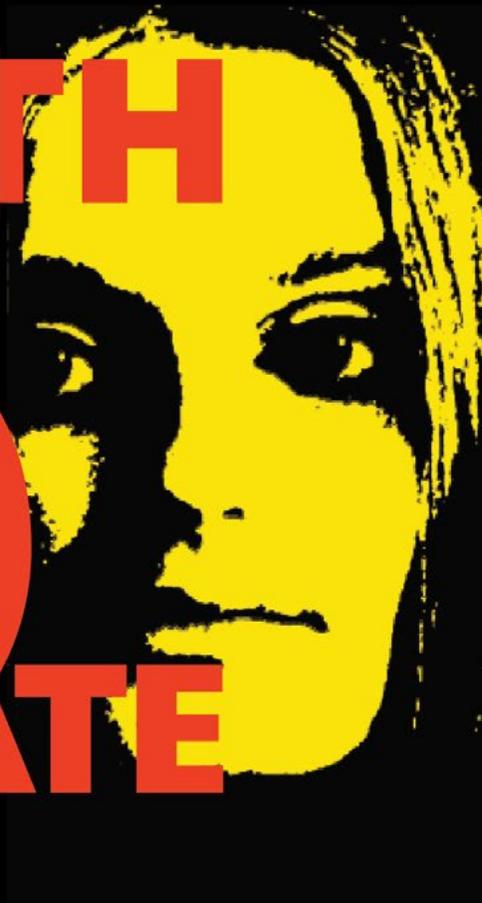


sample chapters

THE
5TH
ESTATE



STEVEN R. BERGER

The Fifth Estate

Steven R. Berger

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Chapter 1

When someone knocks gently on your door late at night, you expect to see a friend, family member or a perfect stranger; not a tunnel that takes you back thirty-some years. But that was exactly the feeling I had when I answered the knock on my town home door at 11:35 P.M.

I had been up late putting the finishing touches on a magazine article due the next morning. In my jeans, tee-shirt and sock-clad feet, I stood in the open doorway confused and bewildered.

The outfit was contemporary, double-layered tank top and hip-hugging jeans on a trim early-thirties body. But the face—soft, gray-blue eyes and smooth pink cheeks, all framed by honey-colored hair—was from another time.

“Are you Sebastian Wren?” she asked.

“Mo?” I answered.

“No. Morgan’s my mother.”

“Ah, um, you would be?”

“Chelsea.”

“Of course.”

“What’s that mean?”

“Sorry. Please come in.

“It’s just that Morgan always loved Joni Mitchell songs,” I said as I let her by. “She told me that if she ever had a daughter, she’d name her Chelsea.

“How *is* your mom?”

“Missing.”

“What?”

“Missing. And please don’t say ‘You’ve got to be joking.’”

“I wouldn’t. Drop your things and sit down. We’ll talk. Can I get you something?”

“Prozac and a diet anything,” she said, setting a large handbag or small piece of luggage—it was hard to tell which—on the floor. She sat on the edge of an Eames chair I paid too much for at a charity auction.

“Let me see what I’ve got to drink. Afraid I can’t help you with the Prozac.”

I rummaged through the fridge and the pantry for something diet. I don’t drink the stuff, preferring not to embalm myself before my time. It’s also just as true that I can’t stand the taste, or after-taste, as the case may be. However, I do try to keep a little bit of everything around for guests.

“Found a diet root beer,” I said, handing her a glass with ice and the can.

She set the glass on the coffee table and fidgeted with the pull tab, managing to swing it around and break it off without opening the can. “Hey, how about a glass of wine instead? I’ve got an open bottle of Chardonnay in the fridge,” I said, taking the can from her shaky hand and making a quick exit to the kitchen.

“Sure, okay,” I could barely hear her answer.

“Now I really am sorry about not having that Prozac,” I said, returning to the living room with the chilled wine and a pair of glasses.

“That’s okay. I was half joking.”

“It’s the other half that concerns me,” I said as I poured. “Is there a last name that goes with Chelsea?”

Before she could answer she was distracted by the sudden appearance of Motley, my 22-pound roomy.

“What the fuck is that?”

“I see you’ve inherited your mother’s tact and grace. That’s Motley. He’s a Maine Coon cat. The largest and most playful breed. Very friendly too,” I said, stalling to get my bearings as the long-haired feline sniffed the leg of her trousers and then rubbed up against her. “I hope you’re not allergic.”

She reached down as I poured the wine and stroked Motley from head to tail. “Naw, I love animals.” The cat had a calming effect on her. Sitting opposite Chelsea I let them bond for a moment while I tried to sort through the myriad questions racing around my brain like atomic particles.

“O’Connor,” she said as she lifted her glass, took a mouthful of wine and gulped it down. “Chelsea Hope O’Connor.”

That answered about a half dozen of my multiple queries. Her mother, a serious old flame from college was Morgan Hope O’Connor. Hope was also her grandmother’s middle name. Family tradition. I’m sure there was a good story attached to it, but you can’t remember every detail over three-plus decades. Yes, O’Connor, like the late actor, though no relation. That also told me that Morgan most certainly had Chelsea on her own terms, and, from what I’d seen so far, raised her to her own liking.

“You know that begs a question,” I said.

“Yeah. I’m illegitimate.”

“There’s no such thing as an illegitimate child. You either are a person, or you are not a person. I’m an expert. You’re a person.”

“She told me you like to play with words,” she nearly smiled, still petting Motley. “And that you think too much.”

I wanted to ask her what else Morgan told her about me, but there was much more serious business a-foot, as Holmes would have said.

“Motley?” she asked. “Is that for Mötley Crüe?”

“At my age? Not a chance. Motley Fool would be closer. It’s just his splotchy, black, white and tan coloring. My turn?”

“Sure.”

“The top three. What happened to your mom? Have you called the police? And, why are you here?”

Chapter 2

“You’re not going with the typical journalistic ‘Who, what, when, where and how?’” Chelsea asked.

“We’ll get there soon enough.” I was still taken with the resemblance to her mother and wondered what the senior O’Connor looked like these days. Still trim for her age? Probably, she was always vain about her appearance. Even when we lived together, she never let me see her in the giant rollers that helped form her perfectly waved hair, which was perfect for the time.

“Okay, then. First: I’m pretty sure mom was kidnapped. Second: Of course I called the police. Do you think I’m one of those idiots they always show on TV programs? In fact, I fucking went to the police station. But they said I didn’t have any real proof. They said mom is an adult and they don’t do Amber alerts or any of that shit for at least forty-eight hours.”

“Has it been more than forty-eight hours?”

“At that time, I don’t know. By now? Shit, it’s been at least three days.”

“That brings us to question number three. Why are you here instead of there?”

“Because, for some god-forsaken reason, she told me to come to you if anything strange ever happened to her. Does that fucking help?”

“Chelsea, try to calm down. You’ve come a long way. You’re tired and stressed. Please, just tell me how were you contacted?” My concern helped hide the pride I felt about being the person Morgan wanted her daughter to find if she was in trouble.

“Text message,” she said, reaching in her bag for a cell phone. “Here, take a look,” she pushed a few buttons and there on the screen was:

pckd up mo/pls no/mr ltr

“How do you interpret that?” I asked.

“I think it says, ‘picked up mo, police no, more later.’”

“And what did the police think it said?”

“They weren’t sure. They finally decided that it could just as easily mean, ‘picked up more plans, no more letters.’”

“Does that make any sense to you?”

“No. But they said I was just distraught. Goddamn right I’m distraught. Someone’s kidnapped my mother.”

“Chelsea, drink some more wine. I’ll help you anyway I can. Especially since your interpretation actually makes some sense, theirs, not.

“Why do you think they text messaged to your phone instead of calling?”

“It’s not my phone. It’s a cheap throw away. It was between my glass storm door and my front door.”

“That’s certainly suspicious. What did the police say about that?”

“They think it’s a prank.”

“So why a text message instead of a note or call?” I mused half aloud.

“Most likely because it is immediate and doesn’t leave clues like finger prints, specific kinds of paper or ink evidence,” she answered.

“You’re up on your Sherlock Holmes.”

“CSI.”

“What about her house? You went over there, didn’t you? To check things out?”

“Of course. Nothing. In fact, it looked as if the cleaning lady had just left. It was nearly pristine.”

“Check the bathroom for her toothbrush and stuff?”

“It was exactly where it should be. Looked in the closet for her suitcases, they were all there. It was creepy. It was like someone just beamed her up.”

“Do you have any idea who it could be?”

“Not a clue.”

“So, why didn’t you wait and try the police again?”

“I don’t know. Probably because they were such assholes.”

“Or maybe because your mother never had much regard for the establishment, especially the police,” I added.

Her look showed me I might be on the right track. It also seemed to have a subtext that said, mom knew what she was doing when she sent me here.

“Look, Sebastian, may I call you Sebastian?” I nodded my approval. “She said I should come see you if anything weird ever happened. I figured she thought you could help, with your journalistic or investigative background, whatever.”

Obviously Morgan told her about my college major. She was also probably under the illusion that I went on to become the Woodward or Bernstein of my adopted home, Denver. She would have been disappointed to find that all the talent she thought I had went into advertising copy and corporate materials, with enough magazine articles thrown in to keep me from becoming clinically depressed. Even a sprinkling of national recognition and a short-lived newspaper column couldn’t take away my occasional feelings of potential gone unfulfilled.

Chapter 3

“What about your father?” I asked. “Could he be involved somehow?”

“That’s just it, I don’t know. Mom hasn’t told me much of anything about him.”

“She never said how or where she knew him?”

“No.”

“What about your birth certificate?”

“It just says ‘father unknown.’”

“You never met him? He never tried to contact you or Morgan?”

“Mom never even told him she was pregnant.”

“She told you that?”

“Yes, in so many words. She also told me that I shouldn’t try to find him. She was adamant about that, like it would ruin my life or something.”

“Is there anyone else you can think of that might be pissed off enough to kidnap her? Did she come into a lot of money or something?”

“A definite no to the latter. If she had come into a bundle, we’d be living in Italy. And there would have been a generous endowment to Public Broadcasting and animal shelters,” she said, assuring me that Morgan hadn’t changed her politics or passions.

“You knew her,” she continued. “Everyone loves her. But there must have been something really bad between her and my father. Why else would she have had me and never tell him?”

I had to admit her logic was sound. But, no one is loved by everyone. There still may be someone else who had something against her.

“Chelsea, when your mom said to find me if something happened to her, what were her exact words?”

She took another drink of her wine and turned her eyes up to the left, replaying an old conversation. “She said, ‘If anything dreadful or strange ever happens to me, not a disease or a common accident, you need to find Sebastian Wren. He’s an old friend. He’ll be able to suss it out.’”

Although mysterious, and not immediately helpful, that sounded more like Morgan. Suss, a British expression for figuring things out that I first began to use back in the day. Perhaps it was a clue. A time frame. As Chelsea mentioned, I love to play with words. Knowing that, Morgan may have been trying to convey a subtle message. Or not.

“Don’t tell me your mother knew where to find me, after all these years?”

“She thought you were still in Colorado, and that you had family in the old Jewish part of Los Angeles. You’re Jewish?”

“Half. My great grandfather either shortened Renkoski to Wren for the sake of a woman, or he adopted a nickname for convenience. Either way, we’ve been Wren ever since.”

“Whatever. A quick Google search got me to your niece who teaches at Northridge. I dropped her an e-mail

saying that I was Morgan, an old college friend who wanted to touch base. She replied with your e-mail address. That got me to your web site—nice article on the preparations for the Democratic Convention here, by the way. At the end of the article, it said you are a freelance writer in Denver. That narrowed down my search to a simple, ‘Sebastian Wren, Denver, CO.’ When you have an, uh, singular name like that . . .”

“You mean pretentious,” I interjected.

“. . . well, let’s say unique, it’s really pretty easy to be found.”

“Why didn’t you just call?”

“I was afraid you would just blow me off over the phone. It’s harder to do in person.”

“No argument there. Do you and your mom still live in L.A.?”

“She left L.A. in late 1975, when she was pregnant with me,” she said, relieving me of an important, lingering doubt. Specifically, could Chelsea be my daughter? Not if she hadn’t yet been born in late 75. The last time I saw Morgan was Spring, 1974. Another clue?

“Where were you raised?”

“Mostly in the Bay area. I went to SF State. We had a place out by the beach. Mom was involved with a guy named Randy,” she said.

“Any problems between them?” I asked.

“If you mean could he have kidnapped her, not likely. He was an actor. Funny story actually. He got a part where he played a priest. He really got into the role. Read a lot. Got religion. Decided it wasn’t right to live in sin. So he demanded they get married . . .”

“Randy and Morgan?” I asked.

“Yeah. Well, she totally blew him off. It was strange. He wasn’t even Catholic, or anything.”

“What happened to him?” I asked.

“He moved out and got involved with a born again type church. They do a lot of good volunteer stuff. It seemed to make him much happier. So he gave up acting and got involved with a woman in his new church. She got him a job at a sports shoe company. They got married, last I heard. I think one of mom’s friends saw him at a market or something.

“Of course, when Randy moved out, we couldn’t afford the whole rent on the apartment. So we decided to move. I wanted to be more on my own, and mom wanted a change of scenery.

“I got a roommate and finished college. Mom moved to Seattle and, of course, got a job as a buyer for a large bookstore,” Chelsea reminded me that Morgan’s parents had owned a small but successful bookstore in Los Angeles.

“Of course,” I echoed. “So you what, flew out from San Francisco, or did you drive?”

“I drove out from Seattle. Bainbridge Island, actually, if you know it.”

“Actually I do. Some friends live there. Second busiest ferry boat line in the country after Staten Island,” I said, showing off a little.

“So they say,” she said with a yawn.

“Sorry, my pedantry boring you?”

“No,” she said diplomatically. “But I did just drive halfway across the country in two days, and it’s late. Plus the wine.”

“Two days? Is that when you got the text message?”

“No. That came three days ago.”

“So that’s when she was kidnapped?”

“I’m not sure. We haven’t talked in about a week.”

“Was she okay the last time you spoke?”

“Yeah, yeah, she sounded fine. Happy, wonderful. Sebastian, I’m really whacked.”

“Sorry, there’s just so much to find out. Would you like to crash here? You can have my bedroom upstairs. There’s a guest room up there, too, but no bed. I’ve still got an article to finish, and the couch in the office folds out.”

“Are you sure? I can curl up right here, right now, or sleep on the floor in the guest room,” she said.

“My bedroom will be better. I’m likely to be going back and forth from the office to the kitchen down here, and you’ll sleep better in a bed than on the floor. Let me get my toothbrush out of my bathroom so I don’t disturb you later, or in the morning.”

“Thanks,” she yawned again. “Can I help clean up?”

“Put two wine glasses in the sink? Thanks, I’ve got it covered.”

She picked up her bag from the floor like it weighed 100 pounds and started to drag herself up the stairs. “Take a left,” I called after her. Motley skittered around her and up the staircase to take his usual spot on my bed. “And, throw Motley out or leave the door ajar for him, your choice.”

End of sample chapters.

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